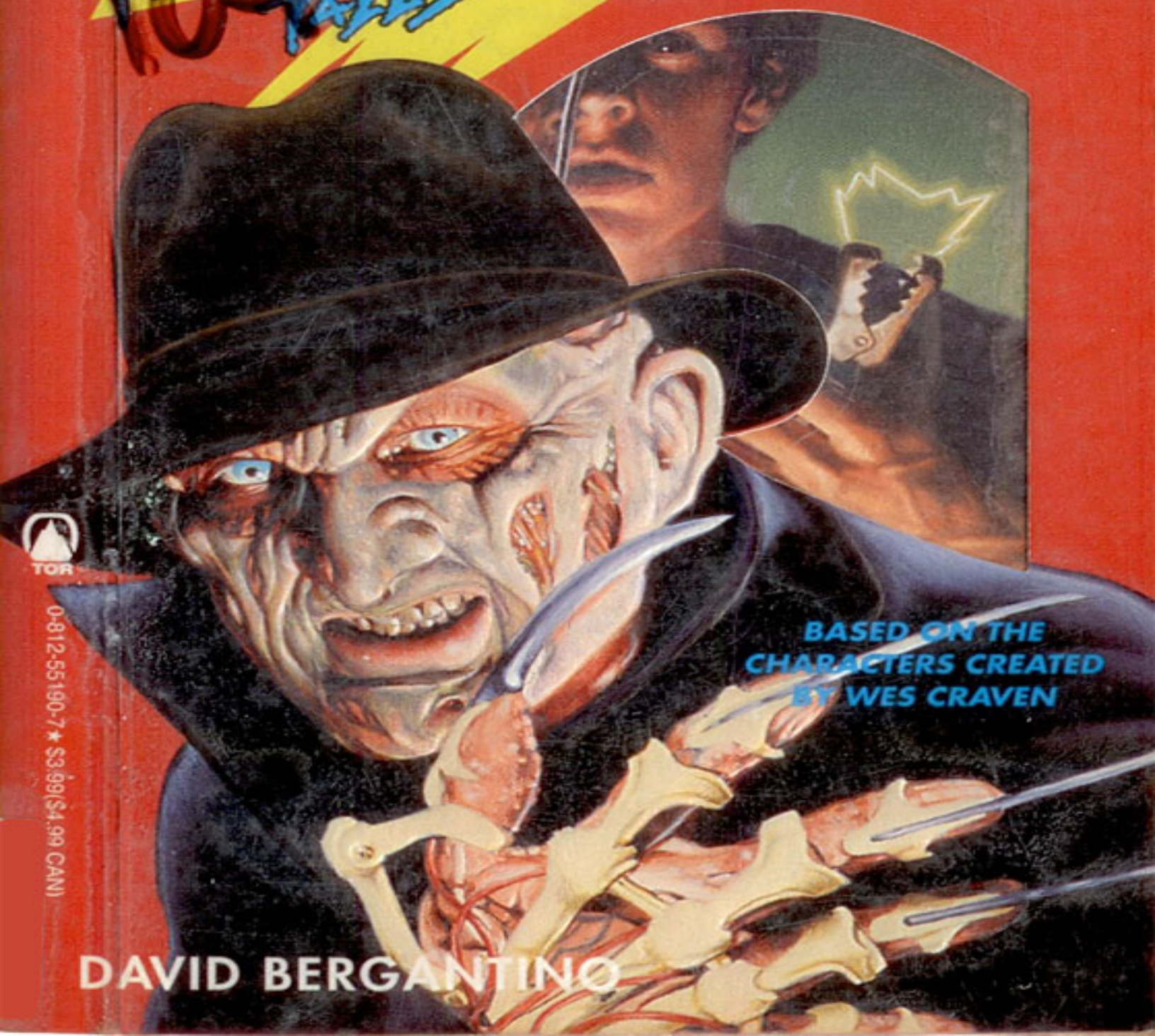
VIRTUAL TERROR

A NEW ELM STREET NOVEL

FREDDY KRUEGER'S™ TALES OF TERROR



BASED ON THE CHARACTERS CREATED BY WES CRAVEN

DAVID BERGANTINO

TOR

0-812-55190-7 ★ $3.99($4.99 CAN)

Annotation

MORE THAN JUST AN ILLUSION…

As soon as Keith removed the 3-D optical illusion poster from the Virtu-Illusions bag, he felt that queasy feeling again. It must have been the frozen yogurt he ate at the mall that afternoon.

He turned back to the poster and positioned it to nail it into the wall. On the third blow he missed the nail entirely and struck the back of his left hand full force. Keith yelled and dropped the hammer. It landed dead center on the poster — and *bounced* off the glass.

This was no ordinary poster. If only Keith could have seen it for what it was — an omen of a dangerous force that would be beyond his most horrifying nightmares.

Just because you get a glimpse into the future doesn't mean you have the ability to change it — perhaps you can only live in terror until it's your turn!

- David Bergantino
  -
  -
  - Prologue
  - Chapter 1
  - Chapter 2
  - Chapter 3
  - Chapter 4
  - Chapter 5
  - Chapter 6
  - Chapter 7
  - Chapter 8
  - Chapter 9
  - Chapter 10
  - Chapter 11
  - Chapter 12
  - Chapter 13
  - Chapter 14

- Chapter 15
- Epilogue

David Bergantino
Freddy Krueger's Tales of Terror #3: Virtual Terror

For the Andersen gang

OCR Mysuli: denlib@tut.by

Prologue

Welcome, my children. It's Freddy, your favorite pinup ghoul! I'm just decorating the boiler room, making it feel more homey. I'm having it done in Post Office Modern, with lots of «Wanted» posters. I had planned on something a little more cheerful, but I couldn't get enough milk carton pictures.

What kind of posters do you have on your walls? Sports figures? Models? Movie stars? Serial killers? It's all the same thing.

Virtual image posters are different, though. They are the ones that look like enlarged photographs of colorful television snow that contain hidden images. If you concentrate and look at them in just the right way, three-dimensional objects seem to hover just beyond the poster's surface. But remember, just because something is visible in the frame doesn't mean nothing else is there. You must look beyond, deep into the «virtual» space. There is much more to see — if you dare.

Be warned, however, that virtual space travel is a trip taken with the mind. And the farther you go, the harder it is to return. You must always look back because if you lose sight of yourself on the other side of the glass you may become trapped. And that wouldn't be a pretty picture, would it? So you might want to stop at the images you think *you're supposed to see.*

So what to do? Do you play it safe, or take the risk and explore the uncharted territory of virtual space? Just remember, if you decide to make the trip through the poster don't forget to keep an eye on yourself in the frame.

So if you do *decide to come, maybe I'll see you here on the other side. Maybe I can persuade you to become one of Freddy's poster children!*

Chapter 1

Keith stood in the bright square of light and looked up toward its source. The skylight framed a picture of a perfect, sunny weekend afternoon in Springwood. A rarity.

And here I am at the mall, thought Keith. As usual.

He groaned. He would much rather be outside, watching a ball game, or even just playing catch. A walk in the park with Pam, his girlfriend, would be nice, especially if he could lead her off the path on a little romantic detour. A transient smile evaporated as he remembered that it was Pam who had dragged him to the mall.

"Now what?" asked Pam, yanking him out of the shaft of sunlight.

"What'd I do now?" he asked. She'd been on his case a lot today.

"You're frowning again. Will you stop that? Please?" She rubbed his arm and gave him the Baby Face. "If you can smile, I'll let you buy me a frozen yogurt."

The Baby Face was attached to a small, slim body, which, when used in conjunction with the Boo Boo Voice, added up to a devastatingly cute package. Some found the baby stuff irritating and manipulative, but Keith found it endearing.

"Okay," he said, quickly forcing a wide grin. "There. See?" Taking her hand, they walked through the food court, arriving shortly in front of the yogurt shop. He ordered hazelnut for himself and peaches 'n' cream for Pam.

"Thank you," Pam said to the clerk who handed her the cone. Then she turned to Keith and kissed him quickly on the cheek. "And thank *you."* He kissed her back, on the mouth, much more slowly. She finally pulled back, embarrassed. *"Keith!"*

"You're right," he said, directing his lips to the frozen yogurt cone instead. "Don't want to ruin my taste for yogurt. After you, nothing tastes as sweet."

"Gag!" Pam replied, laughing. "Let's get to The Limited. The mall is closing soon." She towed him out of the food court and back into the main section of the mall.

As they walked — power-walked, at the pace Pam tried to drag him along — Keith realized that he felt pretty good. He hadn't been sure that this relationship with Pam was going to work out. Outwardly, they seemed mismatched. He was a moody, but mostly down-to-earth, average Joe with a quick sense of humor. She was the spoiled ice princess who needed to map out every moment of her life, years in advance. But Keith understood that the rich-bitch routine was just a cover, concealing someone who was remarkably different. Her alter ego was a determined, aggressive person who took nothing for granted. Perhaps she was overcompensating for the appearance that everything in life was handed to her on a silver platter.

Whatever the case, Pam's willingness to work hard showed most strongly in her performance on the girls' track team. As part of her training, she ran the path that circled Springwood Park each and every day. Her practice paid off. She was the best girl on the team, and could even beat members of the boys' team in some events. There was no question but that she would earn a track scholarship to a university. It was only a matter of which university she would choose.

Keith sighed. He was an athlete — captain of the wrestling team, no less — but he saw no scholarships in his future. To be sure, he would have no trouble going to the college of his choice. Academically, he was far above average. But he was aware that he lacked the something extra that would have truly distinguished him from his peers, the way Pam's athletic abilities set her apart.

Suddenly he was jerked forward, almost off his feet.

"I said stop frowning!" Pam was ahead of him. Apparently he had been moving too slowly.

"Okay, okay already."

"Is something wrong or what?"

"No, just thinking. I…" Keith stopped. They were at the center of the mall, in a section populated by pushcarts. Vendors were selling merchandise ranging from beepers to mugs to T-shirts — small specialty items that didn't require an entire store. A large crowd had gathered around what appeared to be a new pushcart in the group. "Let's go check that out," he said, pulling her out of their beeline.

Pam resisted. "But we don't have time!" she whined. "Today's the last day of the sale and the mall is closing."

"Ah, hold your horses. This'll only take a sec." And this time, he dragged her.

They found the crowd clustered around a pushcart that was selling framed posters. The ones on display contained no recognizable images, just colorful dots and rhythmic smears. Shoppers stood staring or squinting into them as if waiting for the posters to reveal something wondrous. Some would periodically adjust their position in front of a poster, stepping forward and back. Many shoppers held their hands up to their temples as if attempting psychic communication.

On the other side of the cart, a woman cried, "I see it! I see it!" as if she had just had an epiphany.

A sign mounted atop the pushcart read: VIRT-UILLUSIONS. Keith smiled.

"Virtual image posters. I love this stuff!" Releasing Pam's hand, he parked himself in front of a poster.

"Nice… Can we go now?" asked Pam.

"Gimme a minute. I'm good at these things. I'll look at one and we'll go."

"Okay," Pam replied. He could sense that she was rolling her eyes at him. Keith didn't worry about it. He wasn't a terrifically demanding person and she could spare the time. And besides, she could afford to buy anything she wanted whether it was on sale or not. Of course, to be fair, he knew it was against her principles to throw money around needlessly. Still, she could wait just a minute.

Keith stared at the glass covering a poster entitled "Dinosaurs!" Then he focused on a light reflected on the smooth surface. His eyes began to cross and blur. The dots in the poster began to swirl and separate. The outline of a mountain ridge revealed itself. Locking on to the ridge, he focused hard, and within seconds a crude three-dimensional image sprang to life within the picture frame. On the ridge, a Tyrannosaurus rex stalked a stegosaurus. To the left, a pterodactyl soared over a grazing apatosaurus. A volcano erupted far in the distance.

"Cool," Keith muttered under his breath. He had seen this one before, but he found any virtual image fascinating.

Just then, someone grabbed Keith roughly on the shoulder and shoved him aside. He turned quickly to face a boy about his own age, Hispanic and

built like a Special Forces soldier. The other boy's eyes narrowed into threatening slits.

"You were in my way, dude," he growled.

Keith adopted his best street-tough voice and growled back, "Didn't yo mama teach you manners?"

"My mama taught me a lot of things," the boy answered, in a much more authentic street-tough voice. "Like how to beat your sorry ass."

"Oh yeah?" Keith did not back down. He vaguely noticed that the other customers at the cart had started to move away. "Come on wif it, den. Give it your best shot!"

The other boy had stepped back and raised his fists in a defensive posture. Then he opened one hand and motioned Keith forward. "You want it, I got it. I take you out, dude. I take you out right now."

"You think so?" Keith said, stepping forward, accepting the challenge. Then he put a finger thoughtfully to his lips and said brightly, "In that case, there's a nice Italian restaurant downtown that I like. You pay 'cause you asked me, and my mom expects me home by eleven."

The sneer on the other boy's face lasted only a moment longer before he burst out laughing. Keith was smiling. Behind the boy, Pam was also laughing.

"Mario, what's up?" Keith asked. But the question was rhetorical, because for the most part, Keith knew what was up with his best friend. But the question, as well as the special handshake they now launched into, was part of the ritual. So were the occasional fake fights.

"Nothing, dude. Just crawling the mall on a nice day," Mario answered as they finished the handshake by smacking the backs of their hands together and giving each other a thumbs-up.

"Same here. You with your aunt?"

"No," said a voice behind Keith. "He's here with me." Keith turned toward the familiar voice. Carrie smiled at him tentatively. Her straight brown hair spilled over her shoulders. She wore a simple peasant dress that accentuated the curves in her body. "Hi, Keith," she said, revealing her perfect teeth.

And Keith felt the most amazing thing. He felt nothing. He could finally forget that he had been madly in love with Carrie. He could finally forget that they had dated for a year before she had left him. He could forget that she was now his best friend's girlfriend. But in truth, he didn't really

feel nothing. He felt the wonderful, exhilarating absence of pain. And for the first time in a long time, he saw her as a friend, not an ex who had hurt him.

"Hi, Carrie," he said pleasantly. Then, just so their eyes wouldn't lock and make things awkward, he turned back to Mario. "Check this out — virtual image posters!"

"I know. Can't look at those things. They give me a headache."

"Yeah, well, we were just leaving anyway," Pam interjected. "Gotta get to The Limited sale. *Right,* Keith?"

"I know," suggested Keith, "why don't you girls go there and Mario and I will meet you. I wanna check out a few more of these."

Pam turned to Carrie. "Come with me?"

"Sure," Carrie agreed.

"Uh, I think I'm gonna go with them," Mario said. "I'd just get a headache, anyway."

"All right, I'll catch up with you guys in a few minutes."

"Can we just *go*?" Pam barked. With that, she almost yanked Mario's arm out of his socket to get him moving. Keith watched them for a few seconds and then turned back to the pushcart. He scanned the easels for a poster he hadn't seen before. Nothing on this side. On his way around the pushcart, he stopped at "F-15 Fighters." He'd seen this one as well, but stared at it anyway.

"You know how these things work?" asked a voice beside him. Keith lost his concentration. Apparently it was a day for voices popping up out of nowhere. He turned and found an ugly stringy-haired guy standing next to him. Though he was probably in his early twenties, the dark circles under his eyes, the unhealthy pallor of his skin, and his general unkempt appearance made him look much older. Pinned to his wrinkled button-down shirt was a tag with the Virtu-Illusion logo.

"No, how *do* they work?" Keith asked. He knew, but obviously the guy wanted to try out his sales pitch.

"Oh, I'm Mel, by the way." The cashier offered his hand. Keith reluctantly shook it.

"Hi. I'm Keith."

"Cool. It's like this, Keith. The computer embeds a picture in these dots, which are otherwise in a regular pattern. The picture actually disrupts that pattern, but, like, you don't notice that by just, y'know, looking at the

picture. But, y'know, when you stare at it, by crossing your eyes and stuff, sort of looking beyond the picture, your brain senses the disruption of the pattern. When it does, it tries to fit everything into the overall pattern. The image appears when your brain reorganizes the, y'know, *visual* information."

"Thanks," Keith said sincerely, hoping he didn't sound sarcastic.

"No prob," Mel answered eagerly.

Keith moved around the cart and found a poster entitled "Mysteria." This was a new one. Mel stood silent as Keith stared at it. The hairs on the back of Keith's neck tingled with the awareness that the cashier was studying him. Maybe that was why he couldn't catch the image in this poster. He sighed heavily and concentrated harder.

"Can't see anything in that one, can you?" Mel finally asked.

Without taking his eyes off the poster, Keith answered, "Not yet. Do you know what I'm supposed to be looking at?"

"Nope," Mel said, then quipped, "It's a Mysteria to me."

Keith winced at Mel, who was smiling proudly, and resumed staring at the poster. "I'll get it eventually," he insisted.

"Right." Mel obviously doubted Keith's ability. He kept silent for about ten seconds. "Y'know, for a minute there, I really thought you guys were gonna fight."

"Nah, that's just an act. We're friends. Besides, I'd never pick a fight with him. He'd beat the crap out of me." He wasn't getting anything out of this poster. If Mel would stop talking, he might have a chance.

"Yeah, I bet. Looks like a dangerous guy."

"Nah. He's not dangerous. Moved here from the inner city, gangland, all that stuff. But he's past that."

"Well, then, that's cool. I knew people like that when I was a kid, and I always used to want to beat the crap…"

Suddenly something seemed to leap at his head from the poster. Keith stumbled backward and he shielded his face with his hands. Something soft and warm began to ooze quickly through his fingers and flow across his eyes. The poster had somehow thrown out a pseudo-pod of color, a bowling-ball-size glob which was now enveloping his head. The pressure began to mount as it tightened against his skin, filling his eyes and nostrils. The slime pinned his hands in their upraised position. Keith totally panicked when he realized, whatever this was, it held him firmly in place.

He screamed and the substance rushed into his mouth and down his throat, filling his lungs. Keith began to suffocate and his mind went as black as his blinded eyes.

Terror was his last sensation.

Chapter 2

Spiders, hordes of them, were crawling over his legs. A fat boa constrictor wrapped around his neck was slowly but surely tightening its coils. Screaming voices could be heard far away. Some near. There was screaming everywhere. Agonized. Desperate. Corpses, dead things, were coming for him. Coming to feed on him. Keith found himself half-buried, unable to move his limbs. Something very old, and very evil, was above him, studying him… laughing.

Keith felt terror before consciousness. As the feeling of being buried alive quickly retreated, he realized he was not breathing. Nor was he able to. Then there was a flurry of motion, but his thrashing was restricted by several pairs of hands pinning him down. Then a dull, echoing voice began to speak:

"Attention, shoppers… the mall will be closing in fifteen minutes."

Only then did his instinct to breathe return, if not his ability. His vision began to clear and Keith saw a circle of faces above him, including a tall, powerfully built security guard. There was also another man whom he recognized, but only vaguely. He stopped struggling and the hands withdrew. His breath came in gasps now, but it was coming. Then the vaguely recognized face floated down next to him.

"Wow, man. Are you okay?" The familiar stranger helped him to a sitting position. "Take it easy, they're calling an ambulance."

"What happened?" Keith asked.

"I don't know," answered Keith's apparent savior. "One minute you're looking at the poster and the next you're having some sort of seizure. You epileptic, man?"

Keith didn't answer immediately. His breathing was still erratic, and therefore too precious to waste on words right now. As he looked around, the crowd that had gathered began to disperse, murmuring discontentedly. Only the security guard remained, who held Keith down with a strong hand as he tried to stand.

"You probably shouldn't move around, buddy," the guard said, showing genuine concern.

"No, I'm okay," Keith gasped unconvincingly, and stood anyway. His breathing was coming much easier now, and he shook away the last remnants of the overwhelming fear that had engulfed him. Before him was a rectangle of color labeled "Mysteria." He remembered now: The poster had «attacked» him. Or so he thought. Evidently he must have imagined it. "I gotta go, my friends are probably waiting for me."

"You don't look so good, buddy. You should wait for the ambulance." The security guard looked worried. He must have been; he was the last of the crowd that had been surrounding Keith when he came to.

"No, really, I'm okay," Keith insisted, this time more believably. "It was just something I ate. My friends'll take me home." Still, the security guard remained unconvinced. "Look, I'm up and walking. Heck, maybe someone's having a heart attack or a stroke somewhere else in this mall. This is a false alarm, honest."

The security guard considered Keith's words for a minute, then, reluctantly, picked up his walkie-talkie and called off the ambulance. Shuffling away, the guard now appeared aimless. Only Keith and Mel remained at the pushcart.

"That was incredible!" The clerk seemed excited, as if he had seen a UFO land in front of him rather than the unexpected collapse of a customer. Keith figured the crowd, the security guard, and the cashier had seen too much so-called reality television. Apparently everyone had hoped for a dramatic and bloody ending, rather than Keith's quick recovery.

"Well, uh… sorry." Keith wasn't sure whether he was apologizing for his collapse or its ultimate lack of drama. "See ya," Keith said as he started to walk away.

"Hey, wait," Mel called. Keith stopped and glanced back. "I feel, y'know, kinda responsible. Let me make it up to you." With that, the clerk picked up «Mysteria» and handed it to Keith.

"Whoa! That's totally not necessary," Keith said, refusing the poster.

Mel continued to push it toward him. "Look, man, it would make me feel better. Please?"

Keith was about to refuse again, but the words seemed to stick in his throat. The cashier sincerely wanted to make amends. As unnecessary as that was, Keith couldn't bring himself to disappoint him. He took the poster.

The instant he touched the frame, a sick feeling formed in the pit of Keith's stomach. He had to fight the urge to vomit, and worse, the urge to

smash the poster to the ground. But he didn't want to insult the clerk. He also knew he couldn't just take the poster, so he reached for his wallet.

Mel stepped back. "No, it's on me. Really."

"C'mon," Keith insisted. "Let me give you something for it." He searched his wallet and came up with ten dollars. The poster actually cost a lot more than that, but Mel was going to give it to him for free anyway. At least it was something. Mel just stared at the money that Keith held out. He could tell the cashier wanted to take it. "Go ahead. I know it's not enough, but let's just call it even. Okay?"

Mel hesitated another moment. Then he slowly reached for the money. "All right," he said carefully, considering it. Then he looked up at Keith and smiled. "It's a deal."

"Good." Keith was relieved. By now he really wanted to leave. "Can you give me a bag for this? I don't want it to break." Actually, he didn't care remotely about the poster. But it was beginning to feel like an iron in his hands, getting hotter by the minute.

"Sure thing, man," chirped Mel. He spun around, put the money on the pushcart, and fetched a bag from the compartment underneath. Deftly he grabbed the poster from Keith and bagged it. When he was finished, he handed it back.

Since it was insulated by the paper bag, Keith couldn't feel any heat from the poster. But what had he felt? Obviously Mel had noticed nothing unusual. Keith wondered if he was coming down with the flu.

"Well, thanks for not wanting to sue Virtu-Illusions," Mel told him, obviously relieved. Seeing Keith's confusion, Mel explained, "Some people think these posters can bring on epileptic seizures or something. That's what I thought had happened."

Now Mel's reaction made sense to Keith. If, by giving away a poster, Mel could ward off a lawsuit, then his company would consider him a model employee. "Don't worry about it," Keith told him. "The thought never crossed my mind. Anyway, thanks for the poster." Keith turned to walk away, but Mel stopped him again.

"Wait a sec, man. Do you believe in fate, or karma, or astrology, you know, stuff like that?"

"Not particularly," Keith answered impatiently. He really wanted to go home and crash.

"I'm into that stuff," said Mel. "Most people don't really believe, but it's all real, man." He looked around as if a fly were circling his head and said mysteriously, "There's all these invisible forces and energies that influence our lives." An amused smile appeared on Mel's face as he patiently explained to Keith, "See, maybe your reaction to the poster was fate. Like, you were meant to have the poster. It sure got your attention. I mean, maybe it's better if a gorgeous chick is meant for you, instead of a poster, but fate is what it is. It's mysterious. And me giving the poster to you, that's karma. Good karma. I do a good thing for you, and eventually, good comes my way. Y'know? What goes around comes around."

Yes, Keith thought, it's definitely time to go home.

"Yeah, well, thanks a lot for the karma," he said as he began to leave. Mel's voice stopped him once more.

"Speaking of astrology, man, what's your sign?"

Keith stopped abruptly and turned to stare at the clerk. Oh brother! he thought.

"Right now it's EXIT," Keith replied as affably as he could manage. It was all he could do not to burst out laughing. "I gotta meet my friends." As he spoke, he walked backward away from the pushcart.

"Right," Mel laughed. "You're a trip, man, you know that?"

Keith slapped an I-know-sometimes-I-bust-*myself*-up grin on his face, waved, and turned around. He casually glanced back as he walked away, and saw Mel putting the ten dollars into his hip pocket.

*** * ***

Keith found Pam waiting by an exit with Mario and Carrie. They each held a large shopping bag. Apparently Pam — or more accurately, The Limited — had made a killing.

"Sorry, I'm late," Keith called out as he approached.

"We have to go right now," Pam said crossly. "I'm behind schedule. If I don't have dinner soon, I won't have time to rest up for my seven o'clock run. After that, it gets too dark."

"As you wish, madam," he said taking her hand. Keith didn't mind not having an opportunity to explain himself. He really just wanted to forget the whole episode.

"We'll walk you to the car. This is all Pam's stuff anyway," Mario said. They started for the parking lot. "What's that? One of those posters?"

Keith frowned. Now he'd have to tell at least part of the story. *"Eeww!"* Pam said, wrinkling her nose. "You bought something from that creepy guy in the mall? Druggie?… I think so."

"Maybe," Keith answered mildly. "He is kind of interplanetary, but whatever. He gave me a deal. Ten bucks!"

They arrived at the car and Keith opened the trunk for the bags.

"I don't even want to know what you did to get that much of a discount," Mario said suggestively.

Carrie swatted his shoulder. "Don't be gross."

"Ha, ha," Keith responded dully as he slammed the trunk closed. They stood around the car for a moment longer.

"Which one'd you get?" asked Mario. " 'F-15 Fighters'? No, wait… 'Dinosaurs'!? That's more your speed."

"Neither. You guys are going to laugh at me when you find out what I got."

"Cool," said Mario excitedly, rubbing his hands together. "Never pass up a chance to laugh at you. Fess up, what is it? Do they have posters with naked women? I'd risk a headache to peep that!" Carrie wrapped her hands around his neck to gently strangle him.

"Actually, I don't know what exactly is on this poster. The guy was gonna just give it to me for free." All three of his friends looked at him incredulously. No one *ever* gave things away for free. Reluctantly Keith explained with a «lite» version of events, telling the others he became dizzy and had to sit down. He didn't want to talk about the strange things he felt or saw; they'd just think he was crazy. Finally he related Mel's riff on karma, and how the cashier had pocketed the money Keith had insisted on giving him. Carrie jumped on that.

"That doesn't sound like good karma at all," she said. "Sounds to me like he talked you into helping him steal. That's not karma, it's theft."

"I bet he'll use the money to buy drugs," Pam stated matter-of-factly.

"Probably not," Mario told her. "Not much you can get for ten bucks these days."

"Look," Keith told her, "He felt bad and gave me a discount." Then he added weakly, "Maybe he was making change or something and put the money back after I left."

Carrie didn't believe it any more than he did. "You got used and you know it. You should do something about it."

"If I hadn't turned around, I wouldn't have known," he said defensively.

"But you did turn around," she pointed out. "And you do know."

Keith found Carrie's tone irritating. It was a familiar sound from when they had been dating. Usually her clear head was good to have around, since he tended to be impulsive. Other times, she was too much like a parent.

"Fine," he snapped. "If you have such a problem with the poster, then don't look at it. Besides, it'll be in my bedroom, so how would you get a chance?"

Carrie recoiled as if she had been slapped in the face. Then she just turned and walked away. Mario and Pam at first looked shocked, then disgusted.

"Nice move, Karpov," Mario sneered at him.

"Carrie, I'm sorry," Keith called after her, but she ignored him. Pam shook her head in disappointment.

"I'd better go catch up with her," Mario said when he realized Keith wasn't going to say anything more. He said good-bye to Pam, then turned to Keith. "I'll catch you later, dude," he said, and left without the ceremonial handshake. Keith knew he had screwed up.

Keith and Pam watched Mario until he caught up to Carrie. Then Keith silently unlocked his car door and he and Pam got in.

*** * ***

They were barely out of the parking lot before Pam started in on him.

"Aren't we Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde today?" she asked snidely.

He was gonna get it, he figured. And how. "Look, I didn't mean it the way it sounded. She was just pissing me off. And… I'm still kind of dizzy from before. Anyway, it has nothing to do with *us*, I mean, me and you. Let's forget about it, okay?" He braced himself for her next onslaught.

"Well, okay," she consented, her tone softening. "It's just that if it hadn't been for that Freudian slip of yours, I was going to suggest that we double-date soon."

"Really?" Keith asked, utterly taken by surprise. Pam had always been jealous of Carrie. She often complained about having to compete with her, despite Keith's insistence that he was over his former girlfriend. "You'd be okay with that?" he asked, figuring there was a catch.

"Yes," Pam assured him. "But only if you're okay with it. You seemed fine when we first saw them in the mall. The idea occurred to me while we where shopping. It's the first time I've been with them together, really, and talked to Mario. I always thought he was a punk."

"Hey…"

"I know he's your best friend," she told him quickly. "And I've always wondered why. But we talked today and now I know."

Keith didn't respond immediately. Instead he drove silently, considering her suggestion. At first, when Carrie had left him for Mario, he had hated them both — Mario for stealing his girlfriend and Carrie for betraying him. But Keith had finally come to understand that people can't «steal» one another — the other person has to *want* to be stolen — and it was eventually possible for him to forgive Mario. They resumed their friendship within a month.

His feelings for Carrie were harder to reconcile. His ego would not let him believe that she could want anyone else but him. So the pain stayed with him. And this was why he and Pam had never gone out together with them. They had run into each other before, and there was always the pain to deal with. Until today.

"Actually, that might be good," he finally said. "For all of us. That is, if I haven't messed things up."

"Carrie's a big girl," Pam assured him. "She'll get over it. I think it *will* be good. But *you* have to ask. Not because I suggested it, but because it's what you want."

"It is," he told her with conviction. "And I will."

Pam seemed very pleased.

"Good!" Then her excitement level rose another two notches. "Now, you wanna hear what I bought while you were haggling over that icky poster?"

Keith laughed. This double-date thing must have been important to have preceded Pam's review of her shopping spree. She took her shopping very seriously.

"First off, I got this way cute lace-trim blouse. It's TDF!" she squealed.

"To Die For," Keith snickered under his breath.

"The blouse is pink and the trim is white. You'll love it…!"

The rest of the way back to Pam's house, Keith listened raptly to her shopping report. He nodded, laughed, and gasped in wonder at all the right places. She had barely finished by the time he pulled into her driveway in the nice section of Springwood. He helped her carry her mall spoils into the house and said hello to her parents. Then she walked him back out to the car for a quick kiss where they would not be seen. Keith dutifully waited until she reentered her house before leaving.

Driving home down Elm Street, Keith passed the old Thompson house. It was run-down and abandoned, though supposedly not quite empty. Rumor had it that Freddy Krueger still «lived» there. The houses on either side were pretty shabby as well. The only people willing to live along that part of Elm Street were families with low incomes who could not afford proper upkeep. Once, the city had tried to demolish the Krueger house in order to invigorate the neighborhood, but a series of accidents — some resulting in death — had stopped the project.

Keith shivered as he drove past. He always did. A block later, the dingy, unkempt houses gave way to trim lawns and new paint jobs. A few blocks more and Keith was home.

After he parked, Keith took «Mysteria» up to his room. Posters of all sorts, framed and unframed, already covered his walls. It almost gave him an excuse not to put up the new poster — after all, he didn't even know what was in it. In the end, he decided to challenge himself by attempting to discover the image that lurked in the colored dots. So to make room, he took down an old one taped near the closet door. From the garage, he brought up a tool kit and pulled out a hammer and one large nail. His mother didn't allow him to put nails in the walls, but she never came into his room, anyway. That was one of the good things about his mother. She pretty much left him alone and respected his personal space. He even had his own phone line, which she never touched when he wasn't home, agreeing instead to let the answering machine in his room pick up. As long as he didn't run up exorbitant phone bills — which he didn't — she allowed him the privilege of a private line.

Keith removed «Mysteria» from the Virtu-Illusions bag slowly. Looking at its colorful surface, he braced himself for the terrible pseudopod or a burning sensation on his hands. Neither happened, but he felt an

immediate tightness in his chest. Maybe he *was* coming down with a flu. Then Keith found himself remembering the pushcart cashier stuffing the money into his pocket, and his own argument with Carrie. A nagging fear dawned on him. Maybe he shouldn't have bought the poster. It wasn't the money. He suddenly feared that there was something wrong with the poster itself. Something that had caused his strange visions. Then he knew it with a terrible certainty and dropped the poster as though it were a dead animal. His feeling of dread retreated immediately. He could breathe normally. Whatever he had just felt, it was gone now.

Keith picked up the poster. Holding it against the wall, he guessed at where to put the nail. His breath hitched again and he felt dizzy, so he set the poster down once more. After a few deep breaths, he returned once more to the increasingly difficult job of hanging the poster. Determinedly he held the point of the nail against the wall. Holding the hammer in his right hand, he drew it back and solidly struck the nail twice. Strong, steady hammering was better than little taps, he had read in a carpentry book. Keith readied the third blow, preparing to put all his strength into it. He swung — but this time, he missed the nail entirely. Instead, he struck the back of his left hand. There was a crunching sound and a great deal of pain. Keith yelled and dropped the hammer. It fell squarely onto the center of the poster. Metal connected with glass and the hammer simply bounced off. The force knocked the poster forward and it fell facedown.

Keith fell back onto his bed, thrashing in agony. Finally he was able to sit up and examine his hand. He stared at the perfect black circle, slightly larger than a quarter. The rest of his hand had turned a frightening shade of purple. The fingers would not move.

Chapter 3

Keith ran to the phone and pressed the speaker button with a finger from his good hand. Without listening for a dial tone, he hit the auto-dial button for Mario's number. A joyless female voice answered. Mario's aunt.

"Hi, Mrs. Vasquez, it's Keith." He tried to speak normally, but it was difficult through clenched teeth. "Is Mario there?"

"He's studying right now, Keith," she told him quietly. "He'll call you when he's through." His aunt was a strict disciplinarian who insisted on set times for homework. But she was fair, rewarding Mario's hard work with the freedom to do as he pleased when he was finished studying.

"Could I please speak to him now?" he asked, knowing she would be shocked by his insistence. "I wouldn't ask, but I just smashed my hand with a hammer and my mom's not home. I may need to go to the hospital."

Mrs. Vasquez was silent on the other end, as if trying to calculate if this was an adolescent ploy or the truth. "I'll get him," she said. Even if she believed him, her annoyance was obvious nonetheless.

"Hey, you hurt yourself, dude?" Mario asked when he came to the phone.

"I think I broke my hand. Will you come drive me to Emergency? I can't move it."

"Broke your hand?! How'd you do that?" Mario sounded more amazed than concerned.

"I'll tell you on the way," Keith said impatiently. "Will you just get over here?"

"I'll be right there," Mario said quickly, and hung up.

* * *

Hours later, Keith and Mario were leaving the emergency room. Keith's left hand was set in a stiff plastic cuff to prevent movement.

"Lucky you *didn't* break it," Mario said as he unlocked the car.

"Yeah," Keith answered quietly. The black circle had turned out to be carbon from the face of the hammerhead. The crunching sound had simply

been Keith's knuckles cracking. But the bruise was serious and the doctor said the hand would have to remain immobile for at least a week. That meant no wrestling, and there was a big match in a few days.

"Thinking about the Westview match?" Mario asked as he climbed into the car.

"Yeah. Well, at least *you* didn't get hurt, Mario. That'd really be a problem." The rivalry between Springwood and Westview was strong. For ten years their overall records had been nearly even. But it was Mario who had tipped the balance of power squarely in Springwood's favor. With him on the team, Westview couldn't touch them.

"Like it's not a problem you're gonna be out?" Mario asked rhetorically. "You're the captain, dude. You get the team motivated."

"I can do that from the sidelines," Keith pointed out. "But you'd be no help on the sidelines."

"Yeah, that's true," Mario agreed. But they both knew that it was actually Mario who motivated the team now. He could have been captain this year if he'd wanted to, but out of deference to Keith, he'd never pursued the position. Considering that less than a year ago Mario had been *afraid* to wrestle, things had turned out quite differently than Keith would have expected.

Mario had started at Springwood at the beginning of the prior school year. His father had sent him to live with his aunt in the suburbs to get him away from the gangs and urban violence. But Mario was still somewhat tainted by the area in which he'd grown up. More than a little rough around the edges, he was a textbook fish out of water. But a piranha. Because he was new, troubled, and tough, he had gotten into frequent fights.

Several weeks after his arrival, Mario and another student were on the verge of a serious fistfight at lunch. Keith happened to be nearby and managed to defuse the situation with his peculiar sense of humor. Mario had never experienced anything like it before. Where he came from, no one cracked jokes. They only cracked heads.

Mystified, Mario had asked Keith who he was. Keith introduced himself and shook Mario's hand. He then invited Mario to finish out the rest of the lunch period at his table. Bewildered, Mario followed him and the two talked. When Mario explained what he was doing in Springwood, Keith had laughed and told him he had come to the wrong place to avoid violence. Then he told Mario about Springwood's unsavory history: Freddy Krueger,

his death at the hands of the Elm Street parents, and rumors that Freddy still lurked — and killed — in dreams.

Mario had found the story unbelievable, but took Keith seriously.

"Don't worry," Keith said to reassure him. "They're really just a lot of rumors. But you should be aware. An awful lot of people — kids, mostly — die around here."

After that, the two became close friends. The chip on Mario's shoulder quickly wore away and he focused his energies on athletics. He took to weight lifting. Then Keith invited him to join the wrestling team. Mario refused at first, without explanation. Then, hounded by Keith, he finally explained that he was claustrophobic. He couldn't stand to be pinned. He'd go nuts, he claimed. Fine, said Keith. Just don't get pinned. So Mario joined.

And somehow, Mario had managed to follow Keith's advice. During the entire wrestling season, no opponent had pinned him. The few times it nearly happened, Mario had exploded in a burst of almost maniacal energy, quickly turned the tables, and won the match. Mario had told the truth: He truly *was* claustrophobic.

No matter how close they became, Mario offered little information about his previous life. If pressed, he would admit that it had been bad. Really bad. But he would say no more than that. Keith guessed that Mario had not exorcised the demons of his inner-city life so much as imprisoned them within himself, only to let them out at crucial moments to do his bidding — when he wrestled, for example. Sometimes Keith wondered what would happen if Mario lost control of the demons.

"By the way," Keith said, "I'm really sorry about what I said to Carrie today."

"Sometimes you're too clever for your own good. But don't apologize to me, dude. You can call Carrie yourself."

"I will. And another thing. I thought maybe…" Keith hesitated. He couldn't believe he was actually going to ask this. "We could double-date. You and Carrie and me and Pam."

Mario pulled into Keith's driveway and shut off the engine. "You sure about that? I mean, it'd be fine with me, and I think Carrie would go for it, but you know, it's your party."

Keith suddenly realized how delicately his friends had been treating him for the past six months. It was pathetic. He *felt* pathetic. Mario's

reaction gave Keith the sense that they had been waiting for this moment for a long time. Even Carrie, it seemed. Now he was sure this was the right thing to do.

"It's not my party anymore," he said confidently. "Wallowing? Been there. Done that. Ready to move on."

"All right!" Mario yelled. He raised his hand for a vigorous high five.

Keith raised his good hand tentatively. "Gentle. This is my last one."

Mario laughed and lightly smacked his hand. "You gonna be okay tonight? Need anything else?"

"Nope. I'll talk to you tomorrow." He got out of the car, then walked around to the driver's side. "Thanks a lot."

"Not a problem," Mario said, waving as he pulled out of the driveway.

* * *

The kitchen clock read 10:15. He had been at the emergency room for almost four hours. The house was empty. There was no sign that his mother had been home since he'd left. If she had, she hadn't noticed he was missing. They were like the lizard and the bird on the Galapagos Islands that shared the same nest, but rarely occupied it at the same time. And of course, he had no father who might be concerned about him. He sighed. There was another kind of pain that had not yet gone away. He absently rubbed the plastic brace as he checked the refrigerator door. A single square of fluorescent pink paper was held there by a magnet. Much to Keith's amazement, it read CASSEROLE.

Normally, weekend dinners at Keith's house were informal affairs. If they happened at all. He had expected to find a note with the usual three large letters: FFY, which stood for Fend for Yourself. This appeared on days when Keith's mother would not have the time to prepare any dinner in between weekend meetings of the various clubs, societies, and organizations of which she was a member, FFY had appeared so frequently in recent months that Keith had had the note laminated.

Inside the refrigerator he found a reasonable rendition of a tuna casserole. He scooped some onto a plate and stuck it into the microwave. A few electronic beeps later and the food was heating for forty-five seconds on high.

Forty-five seconds. An infinitely longer time than it had taken for Keith's father to die. The man had been a sales executive. Exactly what kind of sales executive — and for whom — he had long since forgotten. It seemed irrelevant to Keith anyway. What *was* relevant was that Keith's father had been alive once and now was not. He had died in a car accident when Keith was three. Keith could still remember his father, though his mother did not believe him. It was a memory of a presence, rather than an actual person, but Keith possessed that memory. And guarded it.

Keith's sadness and sense of loss over his father's death had grown slowly as Keith grew. At the time of the accident, he had been too young to understand exactly what had happened. His mother experienced an extended period of depression and withdrawal. Her outlook became perpetually bleak. She claimed to have lost the ability to feel. Then one day, her sadness abruptly vanished. She sprang back into life and quickly landed a job as an office manager for a local corporation. Soon, she had reentered the social scene in earnest. Within three years, she had actually met someone wonderful. Someone she planned to marry. At first Keith had instinctively distrusted the man, whose name was Terrance Hopely. Terrance did nothing wrong. On the contrary he was very kind to Keith and his mother. But Keith had a feeling. After long talks with his mother, and great effort on Terrance's part, Keith grudgingly gave in and accepted the man who would replace his father.

The microwave *pinged* and Keith removed his meal. He went to the table and began to eat, chewing slowly, thinking.

Mysteriously, Terrance had disappeared just before the wedding. He left behind a note that read simply, "I cannot explain, but know that I love you. Always." And he signed it. Some of the ink was smudged as if Terrance had been crying. Keith's mother was crushed. It was as if a husband had died all over again. Depression reasserted itself. But she had her job, and so the withdrawal was never quite complete and the sadness didn't last as long. This time, however, she strenuously avoided wading back into the dangerous waters of dating. Instead she turned her energies toward a variety of hobby and social service organizations. She was always quilting and volunteering and heading up projects. And with the exception of a few very brief, and intentionally hopeless, affairs with married men, she had never again actively sought meaningful companionship.

So Keith had grown up without a father. And recently, with an absentee mother.

As Keith finished his meal, he remembered the time he had seen a photograph of Terrance on the evening news. His general appearance had been altered — longer hair of a different color, glasses, etc. — but the identity was unmistakable. The story had appeared several years after the disappearance of the man who apparently went by the name of Terrance Hopely, Joseph Fishbuck and dozens of others. He was reputed to have been a so-called Thief of Hearts. Apparently he made a hobby of meeting women, usually widows, and wooing them until they accepted a marriage proposal. Then he would leave them standing at the altar. There was no financial gain involved; he did not swindle anyone out of money. According to the news report, his motive was simply to bring his victims to an emotional peak and then dash their hopes.

Also according to the report, he had been shot dead by a former lover who had succeeded in tracking him down.

There's your karma right there, thought Keith. What goes around comes around. Yessirreebob.

*** * ***

Keith left his dishes in the sink and went to bed. He had no idea when his mother would return, but wanted to be asleep long before then. He was in no mood to deal with her inevitable fussing when she saw his injury.

Up in his room, «Mysteria» lay face down where it had fallen earlier. Keith picked it up carefully, expecting to find broken glass underneath it. To his surprise, the glass was not only unbroken, but the surface was completely unmarred. He couldn't even tell where the hammer had struck it. What luck, he thought. But then, a wave of dread washed over him as he propped the frame up against the wall. He let go of the poster and the strange feeling lessened, but this time, it did not disappear completely. A residue of fear seemed to cling to his mind. He tried to shake it off, but it remained as he dressed for bed. After he turned off the light, he felt the distinct sensation of being watched. And somehow, the feeling came from the poster. He tried to ignore the crazy feeling, but it would not go away,

nor allow him to sleep. Finally he got out of bed and flipped the picture so it faced the wall. He felt silly doing it, but he also felt better. Less paranoid.

Sleep came easily then. And with it, dreams.

Chapter 4

Keith stood in the bright square of light and looked up toward its source. The skylight framed a picture of a perfect, sunny weekend afternoon in Springwood. A rarity.

And here I am at the mall, thought Keith. As usual.

He looked back up at the blazing sun. A black sliver had begun to form on its right edge. Blackness grew like an infection, and soon the entire disk of the sun was eclipsed. The blue sky darkened. Day turned to night and the eclipsed sun became a crescent moon. Storm clouds formed, blotting out the moon entirely. Fierce lightning clawed across the sky. Rain pelted the skylight like stones.

Suddenly a strong hand grasped Keith's arm and nearly yanked him off his feet. He yelped in pain.

"Stop frowning, dude, or I'll give you a reason to frown!" croaked a harsh voice. Keith was roughly spun around and shaken for emphasis. Mario, a dangerous glint in his eye, held Keith firmly by the arm. "Come on, the girls are waiting." He shoved Keith ahead of them and the two began walking.

From behind, there came a great crash and the sound of breaking glass. Keith stopped and turned. On the spot where he had stood a moment ago lay a large branch and hundreds of glass shards. Rain poured down through the smashed skylight. Mario pushed him forward again.

"You'll get worse if you don't hurry up," he barked, *"Dude,"* he added with disgust.

Bewildered, Keith allowed himself to be herded to the yogurt stand. On the way, he noticed the mall was eerily deserted.

"Get us some yogurt," Mario ordered. "They'll be here in a minute."

"Hey, what can I get ya, man?" asked the yogurt store employee. It was Mel, looking more pallid than before.

At first Keith could only stare in blank surprise. Then he realized that Mel was waiting for an answer. Turning his attention to the yogurt dispensers, he saw four, labeled CARRIE, PAM, MARIO, and KEITH respectively.

"Uh, I'd like Carrie, please," he said shakily. Mel promptly dispensed some yogurt from the corresponding spout into a cone and handed it to Keith. Tentatively Keith tasted the yogurt. It melted on his tongue, the most amazing taste he had ever experienced. He was about to devour the yogurt when Mario greedily snatched the cone out of his hand.

"That's mine. Get your own." With that, Mario ate the entire cone in three savage bites.

Meekly Keith turned back to Mel, who smiled as if nothing unusual were happening.

"Uh, I guess some Pam, then," he requested.

In a flash, Mel held out a second cone. The flavor of this yogurt was distinctively different, but just as good as the first. Again, however, Mario took the cone.

"That's mine, too." Mario glared at Keith threateningly. "Get… your… own!" He emphasized each word, then wolfed down the cone.

Keith had only two choices left, KEITH and MARIO.

"What do you recommend?" he asked Mel.

Mel winked and leaned across the counter toward him. "Why don't you try some KEITH? Of course, it's not as flavorful as MARIO, but it's okay, CARRIE is sweeter and PAM is creamier, but you *could* do worse than KEITH. Besides, I can give you a deal on it." He leaned closer and lowered his voice further. "Between you and me, no one else'll buy it, unless I'm out of the rest. But I think you'll like it just fine."

Keith was about to order when Pam and Carrie appeared beside him. Mel instantly forgot about Keith and turned to the girls. The cashier was drooling embarrassingly, but didn't seem to notice.

"What can I get for you fine ladies?" he asked lasciviously.

At the same time, both girls said, "MARIO!"

"Thought so. Right away." He turned and quickly served them yogurt.

As the group walked away from the counter, Keith glumly realized he was the only one who hadn't gotten any yogurt. But there didn't seem to be much he could do about it.

Slightly ahead of him, Pam and Carrie chatted and giggled, but ignored Keith. Mario seemed generally calmer now that the girls were around. But when his eyes met Keith's, they glowed with hatred.

"Wait till you guys see what I bought," Pam said brightly as she reached into the department store bag she was carrying. "This is the

ultimate in TDF." With a flourish, she produced a long-sleeved, red-and-green striped sweater from the bag. It was grimy and torn in places. "You wouldn't believe the discount I got. Or what I had to do to get it." She winked at Mario. Then she held the sweater up to his chest. "This is for you. Think it'll fit?"

"Let's see." He quickly pulled it over his head. As he smoothed it out, the girls clapped. He nodded in grim satisfaction. "Perfect."

"Uh, I don't know, Mario," Keith said. "It doesn't look too good. Maybe you should take it back and get another one."

"Who asked you, anyway?" Mario snarled at him. "I sure didn't. Don't know why I would." He advanced upon Keith, forcing him back. "Look, you've been good for laughs, but frankly, we've only hung out with you out of pity. And that's old, *dude*, real old." Keith was pinned up against the wall. "But I think you're good for one more laugh. When I *kill* you. *Dude."*

Mario threw his head back and laughed. It was deep, cruel laughter. Chilling. The girls joined him, but it was all the same sound. As it died down, Mario's face became a mask of pure hatred. Keith fled from the group. The mall lights flickered and then went out. The only light now came from occasional flashes of lightning from above.

"Come on wif it!" yelled Mario, not far behind. "I take you out. I take you out right now."

In the darkness, Keith soon lost his bearings. Tripping over a wire chair, he realized he was in the food court again. If Mel was still at the yogurt counter, maybe he could help. Keith started to stumble in what he hoped was that direction.

"Mel!" he called out in a loud whisper. "You gotta help me. Mel!"

"Over here, man." Mel's voice seemed to come from just ahead. Keith ran toward the counter. A dark shape moved behind it.

"Mel?" he asked tentatively.

"Yeah, it's me, man. What's up?" It was Mel's voice, all right, but he still could not see the clerk's face.

"Help me," he pleaded. "Mario's gonna kill me!"

"Calm down," Mel said soothingly. "Have some yogurt. You'll feel better."

"I said Mario's trying to kill me!" Keith was frantic.

"I know. I know," Mel laughed. "It's all part of the act, right? Here, just have some yogurt."

A yogurt cone floated out of the darkness. Confused, Keith reached for it. At the same time, lightning flashed, revealing the bony claw that held the cone, which was filled with dark red liquid. Keith looked up as lightning flashed again, enabling him to see a skeleton standing behind the counter, covered in gore, wearing a name tag that simply read MEL. Stringy hair framed a leering skull. Thunder boomed in the distance as blood began to gush from the yogurt dispensers.

"Mario can't hurt you now," the Mel-thing cackled. "The only thing he can do to you is give you a taste sensation!" Then it brought the cone up to its teeth and poured the blood onto them.

Terror froze Keith in place. As the skeleton slurped noisily at the bloody cone, a blue glow illuminated the yogurt stand. A grinding noise from one of the dispensers made Keith look up. Out of the top of one machine, Mario's limp, dead body twitched. As the grinding became louder, Mario began to disappear slowly into the dispenser. The machine was chewing him up, making him into yogurt. Keith screamed, but no sound came from his mouth.

His attention riveted morbidly on the scene, Keith saw that beside Mario's corpse — now only visible from the shoulders up — Pam's body protruded from the neighboring yogurt machine. Like Mario, her body twitched and sank slowly, accompanied by the sickening grinding sounds.

Keith shut his eyes against the horrifying image of his friends, but Carrie's voice made them snap open again.

"Keith!! Help!!"

Carrie had appeared in the machine next to Pam. Only, she was alive. She struggled against the bony arms of Mel, which were holding her down. The leering skull turned abruptly to Keith.

"You wanted Carrie all along. Let me make some for you… fresh!"

Holding Carrie firmly with one skeletal arm, Mel reached with the other toward the button that would activate the yogurt machine. In an instant, Keith overcame his paralysis and leapt at the creature. Hooking his fingers in its rib cage, Keith pulled back with all his might, hoping to tear the thing apart. It barely moved, but withdrew its hand from the button. Quickly it plucked Keith's left hand away from itself and began to crush it in its claw. Bones splintered and crackled. Keith's bones. The Mel-thing began to laugh.

"Don't fight it, man. I'm just trying to give good customer service!" The skull nodded upward, past Carrie, who was still struggling desperately. There was one more yogurt machine. It was empty, and Keith's name was etched on its surface. "And it'll be my pleasure to *serve* you next!"

With that, the skeleton pushed Carrie violently backward, slamming her head against the inside wall of the machine. Her eyes fluttered, then closed. The claw, now free, reached for the button once more. Crumpled to the floor, his hand still in the creature's vise grip, Keith felt utterly helpless. He watched Mel depress the button. The grinding noise began immediately. He could hear it as his mind overloaded with pain and despair, and he finally blacked out.

Chapter 5

Keith awoke lying on his stomach, his face buried in his pillow. Hard plastic pressed against his chest. Gasping for breath, he flipped over, relieving the pressure on his bruised hand. Cold sweat flowed from every pore. He tried at first to relax in an attempt to fall back asleep, but the images of the skeleton, the blood, and, worst of all, Mario's cruel face were tattooed onto the backs of his eyelids. Sleep was not an option.

His clock radio told him it was 7:57 a.m. The sky was light. The aroma of coffee weakly invaded his room. He could hear his mother's slippered feet padding around in the kitchen. Normally Keith would have gone on downstairs for a cup of coffee, but he was still unready to explain his injured hand. He headed directly for the shower instead. Keith was, as always, grateful to have a bathroom that adjoined his bedroom. He could avoid being seen and kill time easily. Hopefully his mother would be gone before he had to go down.

Nearly thirty minutes later, Keith stepped from a hot shower. Steam clouded over the bathroom mirror. He opened the door that led into his bedroom to dispel the mist hanging in the air. He pointed the blow-dryer at the mirror and switched it on. Soon a round area on the mirror's surface cleared. Condensation framed Keith's face when he looked at his reflection.

A warp in the mirror distorted his image, giving him a very tall, Frankensteinesque forehead. When he tilted to the side, one eye became decidedly larger than the other. Sometimes Keith would experiment with the position of his face in the mirror, finding new ways to «sculpt» his features. But his nightmare had stayed with him like a vicious hangover, and now he just growled at his reflection, quickly ran some gel through his hair, threw on some jams and a T-shirt, and went downstairs.

The kitchen was empty. His mother had already left. It was Sunday, so there must be some garden club breakfast or brunch. A half pot of hot coffee sat in the coffeemaker. Keith filled a large mug and toasted a bagel to complete his breakfast.

By the time Keith finished, it was 9:30 A.M. Early, but late enough for Carrie to be awake. She would probably be sitting on her back porch, painting. This had been her Sunday routine for as long as he had known her.

Carrie's heart had been set on going to art school since early childhood. She was a gifted painter, the influence of the Impressionists obvious in her work. She had no use for computers, nor graphic or commercial art. Museums and tasteful homes would display her work, she claimed. Not billboards or juice bottles. Yet, for all her desire to become a "pure artist," she lacked the pretension of other artsy types at Springwood.

Keith had not called Carrie in months. Just the thought of doing so now gave him butterflies in his stomach. This was not the sick feeling of the night before but nervousness, plain and simple. He stared at the telephone for several minutes before reaching for it. Holding the receiver in his hand, he stared at it longer until a recorded message asked him to hang up and try his call again. He held the button down until he got a dial tone once more, then punched in Carrie's number. Slowly.

"Hi," he said lamely when she answered the phone. "It's me, Keith."

"Hi, Keith," she said cheerily. He had called during her morning painting for a reason. She was usually in a calm, peaceful mood as she painted. He heard no recrimination in her voice.

"First," he said, barreling forward, "I want to apologize for what I said yesterday. I don't know what my problem was."

"It's okay," she told him. "I think we were both kind of nervous." Keith silently agreed.

"I was hoping we could try again," he said. Then, before she misunderstood him, he added quickly, "The four of us getting together. On a double date. And act normal this time."

"That'd be great," Carrie said without hesitation.

"Really?" he said, stunned. He had expected this to be a lot harder than it was turning out to be.

"Really," she said. He could tell by her voice that she was smiling.

"In that case, how about if we meet at Wide Awake tonight around eight?" It was short notice for everyone, but he was on a roll and didn't want to give anyone, particularly himself, time to change their mind.

"Sounds great," Carrie told him. "But I can't stay out too late. School night and all."

"No problem," he assured her. "This'll just be casual, anyway." It was really happening. He couldn't believe it. "I'm looking forward to it," he added.

"So am I," she replied, utterly sincere. Then she hung up.

Keith sat and breathed deeply for a minute after he hung up the phone. He had been worried that just talking to her again would awaken old feelings, that just the sound of her voice on the phone would make him fall in love with her again. But that had not happened. Instead, he felt as if he was reestablishing ties with an old, close friend, the way it had been when he and Mario patched things up.

Keith did not see Mario as planned that afternoon because his aunt insisted that he make up the homework time he had missed the night before. But he was happy to hear that Keith had called Carrie, and said he looked forward to all of them getting together later. When he told Pam about the plan, she said she was very proud of him. He felt like celebrating the moment with her alone, before they saw the others that night. But when he told her he was coming over to take her for a drive, she said she couldn't. If she was going out that night, she had to finish all her work in the afternoon. Reluctantly Keith let her off the hook and said he'd pick her up later.

Hanging up the phone, he felt let down. It was his own fault for getting so excited.

Because he had no one to hang out with during the day, time crawled at the pace of a snail on Valium. He attacked his homework and finished it quickly. MTV absorbed a few hours, but not enough. Finally he showered and changed and found himself ready to go an hour earlier than necessary. The house was utterly silent as Keith sat nervously at the edge of his bed, watching time march inexorably by. He stood and began to, pace restlessly, at one point stopping before the Virtu-Illusions poster which still rested on the floor. Might as well hang it, he thought. That should kill a few minutes. A blip of apprehension shot through him when he touched the frame, but he ignored the feeling. Just more jitters, he thought. Carefully catching the wire on the back of the frame on the nail, he mounted the poster to his wall. When he stepped back, he judged it to be straight. And on the first try, too, he thought, impressed with himself.

Might as well give this another try, Keith said to himself. The memory of his strange experience in the mall reared up in his mind, but Keith dismissed it. The whole thing had probably just been the result of a glorified head rush. So he focused his eyes on his reflection in the glass.

Several minutes passed before Keith looked away from the poster. The image had not yet materialized. Strange, he thought. It shouldn't be that hard — unless there was no image to see. But why would Virtu-Illusions

sell a bogus poster? *They wouldn't,* he answered himself. Besides, he thought he had caught sight of some kind of image in the poster while he was at the mall. So he tried again… but still no luck. Rubbing his temples to relieve the building tension, he wondered why an image in «Mysteria» was eluding him. He closed his eyes for a few seconds, relaxed, then started again. The next time he looked at the clock, nearly forty-five minutes had passed. He had no idea he'd been staring that long. How did that happen? he wondered. If he didn't leave soon, he'd be late. But conjuring an image had now become an obsession, and Keith resolved not to leave his house until he had seen it. Ignoring a growing headache, he put all his concentration into discovering "Mysteria's" hidden picture.

This time he had better luck. Keith caught the edge of a shape, but a twinge of pain caused him to lose it. His eyes felt like they were being pulled from their sockets. But he was close. He'd get it this time. One more try.

The colorful dots soon diverged again and then began to re-form. A shape appeared, and Keith fought off more pain to keep it in his sight. It worked. An image sprang from the poster.

Keith gasped. Fresh pain flared behind his eyes, but he held his focus. This image was so unexpected that at first he couldn't tell what it was. Fear replaced shock as the image became easily recognizable. He was looking at a male human face. It seemed vaguely familiar, but he could not understand why. A mask of terror and agony stared out at Keith. The eyes were wide with fear and pain, the mouth open in a silent scream. An unidentillable inverted V-shaped object protruded from the subject's mouth. Cat scratches of dread crawled up his back. But Keith could not look away. The image seemed to be drawing him in, infusing him with the terror expressed in the face floating before him.

Finally a vicious bolt of pain, much worse than the earlier ones, caused Keith to clamp his eyes shut, breaking the connection. He staggered to the bathroom. As he swallowed two Tylenol, he wondered why a virtual-image poster would contain an image like that. Usually they showed planes or dinosaurs or dolphins — innocuous stuff. And how could he recognize the subject of one? The really strange thing was that the three-dimensional images were normally very crude and appeared as objects cut from Styrofoam. The face Keith saw was much more detailed than usual. He had

been able to discern individual hairs on the subject's head. Hairs that were standing straight up.

His own head throbbing, Keith leaned against the basin. Closing his eyes again, he let his head hang forward. He breathed deeply and tried to relax. After a few moments, he looked up. His distorted reflection gazed back from the mirror and he quickly looked away. Leaving the bathroom, Keith peeked apprehensively at the poster. Just a swirl of color, no image. Still, he felt a strange attraction to it, as if it wanted him to look into it.

Uh-uh, thought Keith. No way.

Keith averted his eyes and his gaze fell on his alarm clock. Disorientation hit him as he saw that another half an hour had gone by. He was very late. Pam would be waiting and angry. If it were just her, he'd call and cancel the date. But tonight he had the others to think about as well. Canceling now would be viewed as chickening out. Besides, his only alternative was to remain home with "Mysteria."

Definitely no way.

Pam was waiting on her front steps when Keith pulled into her driveway. She was at the passenger door almost as soon as he stopped. He started to apologize, but she cut him off.

"It's okay," she told him as she got in. "I was worried."

"I took a nap and overslept," he told her. And miraculously, she accepted his excuse without question. Usually she wanted full details as to why she was kept waiting. He glanced her way and she smiled at him. Then the smile changed quickly to a look of concern.

"You okay?" she asked. "You look kind of pale."

"Just a little headache," he told her, lying. It was actually a very big headache. The entire drive over he had been trying to forget the tortured face in the poster. But his throbbing temples would not let him. "Took some Tylenol before I left. Should kick in pretty soon."

"Okay. You nervous?" she asked.

"Yeah. A little," he admitted. In truth, however, he was too shaken by the image in the poster to be nervous about his official reunion with Carrie. If anything, Keith was looking forward to being in familiar surroundings with friends.

"You'll be fine," she told him reassuringly. "It'll be like old times."

He returned her encouragement with a smile, but frowned inwardly. Like old times? He wondered what she meant by that. As far as he was

concerned, the old times were the days when he and Carrie dated. Those old times wouldn't be returning. The idea was to start new.

"Why are you frowning?" Pam asked suspiciously. Apparently his inner feelings had surfaced.

"Just the headache," he told her. He decided he was overanalyzing Pam's statement and dropped the subject with himself. I am nervous, he silently admitted.

*** * ***

Mario and Carrie were already sitting at a table when Keith and Pam arrived at Wide Awake. The place was filled with teenagers, as were the sidewalk tables. The coffee shop was a popular teen hangout. In Springwood, *all* the coffee shops were popular teen hangouts.

Keith left Pam at the table while he went to the counter to order drinks. Since Mario and Carrie had already been served, he brought back a cappuccino for Pam. Because he could only carry things with one hand, he had to make a second trip for himself. He ordered a glass of steamed milk with almond flavoring. Normally he was a coffee person like everyone else, but tonight, between the headache, the poster, and the significance of the evening, he opted for something that would relax him instead of making him hyper. On top of everything else, being with Mario reminded Keith of his nightmare. A chill ran down Keith's spine as he remembered the look of hate in Mario's eyes. At the moment, there wasn't even a hint of displeasure in Mario's expression. Seeing that made Keith feel a little better, but the image would not go completely away.

"Sounds like we all had pretty weird dreams last night," Pam told him as he returned with his drinks. "We're gonna do the Dream Exchange."

Keith panicked. He did not want to tell this group last night's dream. But for the moment, he didn't know how to get out of it.

The Dream Exchange was a ritual peculiar to Springwood. Whether it confirmed the legend of Freddy Krueger — or simply perpetuated the myth, as many claimed — Springwood teenagers tended to have vivid and frequently violent nightmares. The teenagers found that by talking about their dreams with friends — by exchanging them with others — the dreams became much less frightening. The first time Mario had heard of this, he

thought everyone in Springwood was crazy. After experiencing several nightmares of his own, he soon realized that the Dream Exchange kept people from going crazy.

One of the cardinal rules of the Dream Exchange was no lying. That violated the sanctity of a game in which trust was vital. Keith had never lied before. But he had never had a dream like this about his friends before.

"It doesn't have to be last night's dream, does it?" he asked. Often that was the rule. But sometimes a group would agree that any dream within a week was eligible.

"Why?" asked Mario suspiciously. "Did you have a dirty dream last night?"

Keith found himself blushing. The reaction was involuntary, but well timed. "No," he insisted, too strongly, hoping to convince them he had dreamed something obscene the night before. "It just wasn't very interesting. But I had another one a couple nights ago." His plan worked. Mario smiled lasciviously. Keith could tell he would want to know the details of the supposed "dirty dream" when the girls weren't around. By that time, Keith would have made up a dream, and he wouldn't feel bad about lying.

"Okay," said Pam. "As long as it was recent. But I'm gonna go first." Keith was relieved. He couldn't remember any other dreams at the moment.

The table became silent. No one could interrupt during the Dream Exchange. Before Pam began, she grabbed her cup of cappuccino and clutched it like a security blanket.

"It was dark. I was in the woods. Lost. In the distance, I heard howling, like wolves. The sound was" — she took a deep breath, another sip, and then continued — "it was scary. Because I thought I could understand what the wolves — or whatever — were saying. Like when you can tell people are talking about you in, say, Spanish, even though you can't understand *what* they're saying. It was like that.

"They howled again… more wolves, it sounded like — and they were closer. And then I knew. They were coming for me. They seemed to be everywhere. I began to run. Leaves and branches scratched my face and caught in my hair. The howling was continuous now. I covered my ears, but it didn't help. The sounds were inside my head. But the wolves weren't. I could see their eyes glowing among the trees. I was surrounded. Suddenly one leaped out of the darkness. Its jaws closed around my ankle and I fell. It

started pulling me backward. Another bit my wrist and started pulling me in the other direction. This whipped the others into a frenzy. They poured out of the woods, biting me all over my body. It hurt so much. I tried to struggle, but it was no use. All I could see was fur and teeth all around me. And blood. My blood. Then the wolves started to leave. Next thing I know, I'm looking up into the glowing eyes of the biggest, most ferocious wolf. It growled and opened its mouth. Its teeth were huge. Saliva dripped from them and the drops burned the ground like acid. This one even frightened the other wolves, who backed away. Snarling, the huge wolf lunged at my throat, about to rip it out. I woke up then."

Pam gulped the last of her cappuccino and placed the cup back down on the table. She was exhausted. She tried to laugh off her obvious fear.

"You can bet I didn't get any more sleep. And of course, every time I started to doze off, a dog barked and I was wide-awake immediately."

Keith took her hand and squeezed it. The Dream Exchange could be rough sometimes, but invariably, telling the dream made one feel better. Pam smiled back. The others also expressed sympathy for Pam. Even Mario, who remained skeptical about the Dream Exchange despite his own experiences, had been swept up in her dream.

"The worst thing," Pam added, "was knowing the wolves were after me specifically." A slight shudder ran through her body.

"Mine's a little one," Keith told them. "I don't know if it even qualifies as a nightmare." During Pam's story, he had remembered a strange dream from early the week before.

"Whatever it is, dude," said Mario, "give it to us. That's what this is all about."

"Okay," Keith began. "Like I said, it's not much. But I was walking in this empty room, and on the floor was a sewing needle. Even though the needle was tiny, and I didn't stoop down to look at it, I could see it very clearly. I could have avoided the needle easily — I didn't have shoes on, and the room was huge. Instead, I walked right toward it and stepped on it. I felt the needle pierce the sole of my foot. And…" Keith stopped. He felt ridiculous, but the others would force him to finish anyway.

"I popped." He gulped down some steamed milk. Everyone was staring at him. He shrugged. "That's it. I just popped."

Maybe it was the story, maybe it was the look on his face, but Mario pounded the table and erupted in a fit of laughter. The girls joined him not

long after. But, Keith noticed, they all sounded like themselves, and the laughter was good-natured. Not the evil cackle of his nightmare.

"You kill me, dude," Mario gasped. "You absolutely kill me." He mimicked Keith: " 'I popped. Man, oh man…" Laughter overtook him once more.

Pam, also laughing, slapped Mario on the shoulder. "Stop that. You're so mean." Mario rubbed the spot she had slapped as if she had hurt him, but continued to laugh.

"Hey, kidlets!" broke in a new, female voice. "What's so damn entertaining?" The group turned toward the voice and the sound of a chair scraping across the concrete floor. A girl with strawberry blond hair, torn jeans, T-shirt, and a motorcycle jacket pushed in next to Carrie, setting a cup of coffee on the table. Mario immediately stopped laughing. Though no one but Keith saw it, Mario briefly glared at the girl. The look was gone in an instant. But for a moment, Keith thought he had glimpsed the evil Mario of his nightmare.

"Hi, Sandra," said Carrie as she moved over to make room for the new girl. "Keith just told us a dream he had, and Mario thought it was pretty funny."

"Figures. So what was it?" Sandra asked Mario.

"Oh, nothing," Mario told her. His voice was flat, as if he were holding back an angry outburst. "Keith'll tell you. I gotta go to the bathroom." He faked a smile and left the table.

"What was that all about?" Carrie asked after Mario had left. Sandra was the only one not surprised by Mario's behavior.

"Oh, don't worry about it," Sandra told them, her voice indicating that she thought it was extremely unimportant. "He and Skrag got into an argument the other day. They'll get over it." Sandra's boyfriend, Richard «Skrag» Morton, was the leader of the school's burnt-out grease monkey contingent. Two years older than the others, Skrag was a third-year senior. He chain-smoked, did drugs, and was rumored to be involved in a series of recent burglaries. Why he kept returning to school when he obviously lacked interest — or ability — was beyond the understanding of even the guidance counselors, who repeatedly urged him to drop out. Rumor had it he hung around to irritate the administrators and teachers who considered him one of their own failures. Others guessed he stayed in high school because it was the easiest way to meet girls.

Anyone not knowing Sandra would assume from her appearance that she was made for a bottom-feeder like Skrag. In fact, it was quite the opposite. Sandra was intelligent and studious, at the top of the senior class academically. Skrag's dangerous image obviously excited her. And dating the smartest girl in the school was Skrag's revenge against the other students who treated him like a second-class citizen.

Oddly enough, Skrag seemed to have a positive effect on Sandra. She had absorbed a bit of Skrag's brash personality without becoming as insufferable as her boyfriend. And she had still managed to maintain her friendships with the «regular» kids. Unfortunately, nothing of Sandra seemed to rub off on Skrag. He was still considered a thug and a loser.

"So where *is* Mr. Wonderful tonight?" Carrie asked. Keith noticed Pam was quietly staring past Sandra toward the back of the coffee shop where Mario had gone.

"Skrag's gonna pick me up here later," Sandra replied. "He had some work tonight."

"Car work?" Keith asked. "Or otherwise?" Everyone at the table knew what «otherwise» meant.

"He had to work on a car," Sandra told him patiently. She was used to the question.

"Doesn't the other stuff bother you?" asked Pam, who had now returned her attention to the group.

"He's quitting his drug business," Sandra announced, as if for the first time. But they had all heard it before. "Not all at once, but I've convinced him to start phasing it out." No one contradicted her. She became incredibly defensive if anyone reminded her that this was repetitious and doomed to fail.

Carrie straightened in her seat, remembering something. "That reminds me, I need him to take a look at my car. It's making funny noises."

"I'll tell him."

"Thanks," Carrie said.

"No problem. It still amazes me how he is with engines." Sandra extended her arms and spread her palms like a television evangelist. "I swear, the man just lays his hands on them and they're *hee-alled*!" They laughed, Pam a little less enthusiastically. Keith was about to ask Pam if she was all right when Sandra turned to him. "So what's this dream that's so funny?"

He repeated the story, but it didn't come out quite as amusing this time around.

"I guess you had to be there," he finished weakly.

"Guess so." Sandra shrugged. "You want a dream, I got one for you." She hunched forward, getting into the mood. "I'm at something like a track meet, except I'm the only one running. There are people on either side of this real narrow track. Not people really, more like an angry mob. Most have axes and knives and hammers — all sorts of weapons. At the end of the straightaway is a glowing ball. I have to get that ball. A gunshot goes off and I start running. Someone takes a swipe at me with a knife and just misses, and that's when I realize I'm not at a track meet, I'm running a gauntlet. Luckily, they can't step into the track, just reach in with their weapons. And I get hit, too. And slashed. The ones without weapons kick, punch, and pull my hair. They keep knocking me down, but I get right back up and keep running. All I know is that I have to reach that ball.

"One time, I can hardly stand after being knocked down. So I begin to crawl. It's slower, but the mob can't reach me as easily. That's when I get a look at my hands. The skin is loose and wrinkled. As I crawl forward, I realize I'm growing older. Rapidly. The glowing ball is what will return me to normal. But if I crawl, it'll take me too long and I'll die of old age first." Sandra stopped and laughed, but humorlessly. "I have to stand up and run; it's the only way. So that's what I do. I get up. I'm running. I get hit, stabbed, knocked to the ground, but I keep getting up. I know I'm covered with blood. But I'm getting older. Near the finish line, I fall. I put out an arm to break my fall, but as soon as my weight is on it, the arm splinters and breaks away like a dry branch. The pain should have woken me up then, because I can still remember the feel of it. I struggled to my feet and stumbled forward. There were only a few steps to go, but I could barely move because my limbs — the ones I had left — were withering and losing their strength. I looked at the faces of the mob around me. Each face was different, but they were twisted with the same type of hate. And it wasn't random hate, but hatred reserved specially for me. One of my legs shattered into dust and I fell. Now all I could do was drag myself forward. I only had a few feet to go, but by the way I was aging, any moment I might just crumble to nothing."

Sandra looked down at her coffee. By the haunted look in her eyes, the scene was replaying itself inside her head. If there was more to the dream,

her expression told them she did not want to continue.

Finally Pam broke the silence. The power of Sandra's dream had overcome whatever had been bothering her. "So maybe this is a stupid question, but did you make it?"

Sandra looked up from the coffee and shook her head.

"That's the thing. Just as I would have crossed the line, the mob closed in on me and blocked the path. They cheated. I woke up as they started to tear my body apart." She paused. With a flip of her hair, she seemed to throw off the weight of the dream and smiled at them slyly. "Dreams are a bitch, and then you wake up," she told them all. Then she raised her coffee cup. "Here's to waking up."

The others soberly raised their mugs to join in the toast that traditionally ended the Dream Exchange. But the sounds of a scuffle at the back of the coffee shop interrupted them. The noise quickly drew a crowd that obscured from view whatever was happening beyond the back entrance. Carrie's eyes met Keith's.

"Mario never came back," she said.

Instantly all four left the table and ran toward the back entrance. Pushing through the crowd and out to the back parking lot, they discovered two figures wrestling on the asphalt. One wore a leather jacket and had dark, greasy hair. The other was Mario.

"Oh, shit," Keith muttered to himself. He turned to Sandra and grabbed her arm. "C'mon." They ran toward the fighters. Pam and Carrie followed.

Before they got close, the dark-haired guy managed to roll on top, pinning Mario's arms with his legs. He began to hammer away at Mario's face. Suddenly, with a great yell, Mario threw his opponent off. Then he leaped onto his opponent and started raining blows on him. It was the same maneuver he used in wrestling. Only this time, Mario was out for blood, not just a pin.

"Mario!" Keith yelled.

"Skrag!" Sandra yelled an instant later. Neither fighter seemed to hear.

Keith walked up behind Mario and hooked his arms around his friend. In the split second before he was going to pull Mario away, he saw Skrag's face.

It was the face in the poster.

Chapter 6

Keith froze. Acting purely on instinct, Mario elbowed him sharply in the ribs. Keith went down, clutching his side and gasping for breath. When Mario realized what he'd done, he almost instantly forgot about the fight. Rising to help Keith, he turned his back on Skrag, who staggered to his feet and prepared to take advantage of the distraction. But just as he was about to sucker-punch Mario, Sandra stopped him.

"That's enough!" she screamed. Seeing her, he dropped his arms to his sides and just stood there, breathing heavily from exertion. "What's going on?" Sandra demanded.

"Why don't you ask pretty boy here," he said between gasps. Blood trickled from the side of his mouth. His eyes glimmered devilishly as he nodded toward Mario.

Mario, kneeling beside Keith, replied with an equally malevolent look. "I'll get back to you in a minute." Then he turned back to Keith. "You okay, dude?"

"I'm great," he groaned, positive that Mario had broken several ribs.

"I didn't know it was you," Mario insisted. "I'm sorry."

" 'S okay. I wasn't gonna wrestle this week anyway," Keith choked out before a spasm of painful coughing hit him. Pam and Carrie joined Mario at his side, their faces wrought with concern. "Don't worry," he told them. "I'll live." He tried to sit up, but the pain forced him back.

A harsh adult voice suddenly commanded everyone's attention.

"The police'll be here in three minutes," yelled Mr. Willis, manager of the coffee shop. "Anyone who doesn't want to get arrested better be gone in two." He made his announcement to the entire crowd, but his eyes were fixed on Skrag. The gawkers quickly began to disperse.

"I think we'd better get out of here, kidlets," Sandra told the group. Skrag winced as he felt his jaw. "C'mon, baby," she said to him.

"Yeah," Skrag said, his eyes fixed on Mario. "Got to get you away from that creep. You're not safe."

Mario stood quickly. Pam and Carrie jumped up to hold him back. Skrag smirked at him, then started to laugh.

"Shut up and come on," Sandra told him, and pulled him away. "See you guys tomorrow," she said to the rest of them, and led Skrag to his car. Soon the roar of Skrag's souped-up Mustang drowned out all other sounds. With a screech and a blue cloud of exhaust, the car tore out of the parking lot.

By now, Keith had made it to his feet. His chest still hurt, but he felt no telltale grinding. No broken ribs.

"Are you going to be okay to drive?" Pam asked.

"I think so," he answered, not really sure. His arm wouldn't move without causing pain to flare in his side.

"Tell you what," Mario said. "Pam, you drive Keith's car to his house. I'll follow behind and give you a ride from there. That okay with you, Keith?"

"Yeah, fine."

"Good, let's go. I think our time is almost up." Police sirens blared in the distance.

The group split up and Keith gave Pam his car keys. He was glad not to drive. He hurt in more places than his chest. His hand wasn't doing that well and his headache had never gone away. He was surprised that his head had not burst open the moment he'd recognized Skrag's face from the poster. Too many images, too many questions, were crammed into his skull right now.

After pulling out of the Wide Awake parking lot, Pam waited at a light in front of the coffee shop. The place had returned to normal very quickly. Most of the sidewalk tables were filled once again with groups of teens. They chattered animatedly, probably recounting the scene they had just witnessed. One table, Keith noticed, was occupied by only one person. He looked very detached from the other patrons. Not only did he not belong, he appeared uncomfortably aware of that fact. Then Keith saw that the person was looking at *him.* Staring. The light changed and the car started moving. All at once, Keith recognized Mel, the cashier at the Virtu-Illusions cart. Mel flashed Keith a creepy smile as the car passed. Then he nodded slightly and winked as if they were sharing a secret. Before Keith could make sense of Mel's gestures, they drove out of sight.

Keith settled back in his seat and let his breath out with a groan.

"You hurting?" Pam asked.

In reply, Keith started whistling, "Nobody knows the trouble I've seen…"

* * *

When they arrived at Keith's house, his mother's car was in the driveway, but the house was dark. He figured — hoped — she had gone to bed. Just as well, he thought. At the rate I'm collecting injuries, I might as well wait a few days and explain everything to her at one time.

Mario pulled in behind Keith's car and he got out with Carrie.

"I'm sorry again, dude." Mario seemed ready to apologize ad infinitum.

"I'm okay," Keith insisted. "But the least you could do is be hurt yourself. You're the one who got in the fight. I don't even see any blood."

"Carrie wiped it off in the car." Mario grinned. "Of course, it was Skrag's blood." He winked at Keith and turned to Pam. "Let's get you home."

"Okay. I'll see you tomorrow, Keith." Pam gave him a peck on the cheek and started to get into Mario's backseat.

"Hold on," said Carrie. "I'll be right there." As Mario joined Pam in the car, Carrie approached Keith.

"What a great reacquainted date, huh?" she said.

"Classic," he replied, laughing. "Really, I'm glad we went out. Whatever happened. I think it'll be easy after this"

"Yeah. Me, too. Take some Advil and get some sleep," she told him. Then she awkwardly held out her hand. He reached for it, then drew her into a quick embrace. They had not hugged in months. It felt good.

"I'll be fine," he told her. "See you at school. G'night."

Carrie returned to Mario's car, and Keith watched his friends pull out moments later.

Keith went up to his room to prepare for bed. He expected that the pain in his body would keep him awake. But worse than that, his racing thoughts outpaced his need for sleep. He replayed the day's events over and over, always returning to «Mysteria» and its image of Skrag in terrible pain. The poster's eerie presence again permeated the room, as if a sinister, invisible light emanated from it in the darkness. Oh, this is all real, it was telling him,

in a smooth, dark voice. And this is only the beginning. The evil droning continued on and on, eventually lulling Keith into sleep.

* * *

Keith woke up with a start, catapulted from a nightmare. He remembered nothing except for an image of Mel smiling eerily and waving at him, as he had that evening. Keith looked across the room toward "Mysteria," which hung shrouded in the darkness of his room. Whatever Keith had felt from it earlier was gone. If it had been there at all. Or maybe whatever strange energy the poster possessed was simply dormant for now. Waiting. That brought him back to the Virtu-Illusions cashier once more. He wondered if Mel, who professed a belief in "invisible forces," had perceived anything strange about the poster. Maybe that's why he had been so anxious to get rid of it. Suddenly Keith was very curious to ask Mel some questions.

Checking his clock, Keith found that only an hour had passed. Conceivably, Mel might still be at the coffee shop. That possibility stoked Keith's curiosity, and he quickly made up his mind. He had to try to find out more about the poster tonight. Mel's strange smile flashed in his mind again. Yes, Keith realized, he knows something.

Keith got out of bed and dressed quickly. He left the house as quietly as he could, and got to his car. His only fear was that the sound of the engine starting would waken his mother. As he pulled out of the driveway, he watched her bedroom window for a light. It remained dark. As he drove away, he realized that she might just now be reaching for the light switch. If she did wake up, and found him gone, he'd be in big trouble when he returned later. Oh, well. He'd deal with it. In the meantime, he had other things to worry about.

Back at Wide Awake, Keith found Mel still sitting at the same table. When Keith approached, Mel seemed pleasantly surprised.

"Hey, man! Have a seat," he said, pointing to the empty chair opposite him. "What're you doing here?"

"Couldn't sleep. Wondered if you were still here," Keith said as he pulled out the chair and sat down.

"You were lookin' for me? Cool." Mel seemed genuinely surprised, and flattered. "Good thing you came when you did. I was about outta here. So, what's up?"

"I wanted to ask you about the poster you sold me." Keith watched Mel stiffen slightly. "Did it ever make you feel weird or anything?"

Mel's face had become a blank. "What do you mean?" he asked evenly.

"I mean, when you touched it, or looked at it?"

Mel regarded him curiously, as if Keith were putting him on. But then he realized Keith was serious. He shook his head.

"Nope. I didn't notice anything. Why?" He sat forward, obviously intrigued by Keith's question.

"I know this is going to sound strange," Keith told him, "but, I don't know, it gives me a bad feeling."

A thoughtful "Hmmmmm…" was Mel's only reply. Keith forged ahead.

"And tonight I saw a face in it," he said. "And the really weird thing is, I knew who it was, too. This guy Skrag…" Keith stopped when another eerie smile lit up Mel's face.

"The guy your buddy was fighting tonight," Mel told him.

"You know him?"

"Oh, yes," Mel admitted, smiling as if Keith had caught him with his hand in the proverbial cookie jar. "I came here tonight to meet him. We had a little… ah… business to transact." He chuckled to himself. "But the fight messed that up. I just decided to hang out and watch people. I just love watching people."

So, Keith realized, Mel was one of Skrag's "customers." That explained an awful lot. But before Keith could think about it any further, Mel returned to the subject of the poster.

"So you saw Skrag's face in 'Mysteria, huh?" He was darkly amused. "Freaky."

"Especially the way he looked," Keith explained. "I think he was being tortured or something. He was definitely screaming." Keith braced himself for a burst of derisive laughter from Mel. But Mel did not laugh. Instead, his eyes lit up gleefully.

"Tortured, huh?" he said dreamily, staring off into space. Apparently he liked the idea of Skrag being tortured. "So you want to know what I think?"

"Yes," Keith said anxiously. Mel's reaction had been strange, unnerving, but this was why Keith had come back tonight.

"To tell you the truth, I think you just don't like Skrag too much. And you're projecting your feelings, or something like that." Keith's expectations were shattered. When Mel noticed Keith's disappointment, he asked, "But you think something else is going on?"

Keith tried to make him understand. "I wasn't even thinking of Skrag. It just happened. I thought you understood weird phenomena."

This hit Mel where he lived, and for the first time he seriously considered Keith's problem.

"Okay, let's say you did see the face in the poster. It still could be you." Keith started to protest, but Mel continued. "Or it could be a combination of you and the poster. I've heard of all sorts of things that fit what you say, and only a few of them mean you're nuts." He laughed to show Keith he was kidding. "Anyway, on the one hand, the poster could be acting like a TV or something, showing you pictures. Or the poster could be reflecting what you see in your head, like a psychic mirror."

Finally Keith was getting what he had come for. "But I've never had an experience like this before," he pointed out.

"Well, that's where the poster comes in. Some people need catalysts to trigger their abilities. Happens all the time, from what I've read. Y'know, like witches had familiars and all that? Either way, Skrag's image in the poster could mean something."

"But what?" Keith wondered aloud.

"Usually it's a warning. I'd say something bad is going to happen to Skrag." Mel seemed quite sure. "If he were a friend, I'd warn him if I were you." Then his voice became low and sinister. "But Skrag's not a friend, is he?"

"No," Keith said, his fear rising, "but…"

Mel interrupted him by laughing. "I'm only playing with ya, man."

Keith didn't respond. Mel's erratic behavior was getting to him.

Mel saw that he wasn't amused, and tried to be more serious. "Look, there's nothing you can do. How could you call Skrag up to tell him he's in danger? How would you explain his face in the poster? He'd think you were nuts. In any case, I wouldn't tell anyone about this."

"Why not?" Keith asked.

Mel answered with a question. "Do your friends think you're strange?" The mischievous glow was gone from his eyes.

"Probably," Keith answered, sure that it must be true to some extent.

"But do they treat you like a weirdo?"

"Of course not. Why?" Mel had shifted gears on him again.

"And what about other people? Acquaintances. How do they treat you?" He seemed on the verge of some great revelation.

"I guess everyone treats me normally," Keith told him. "What are you getting at?"

"See, I thought so," he said, gesturing emphatically with his coffee cup. "No offense, but I think you're strange. I dunno, something about you. But I treat you normal, too, don't I?"

"I guess so," Keith answered suspiciously.

"Start spouting off about seeing faces in a poster, and they're gonna stop treating you like a normal person. That's what happened to me." Mel saw Keith's baffled expression and explained. "See, when I was in high school, I was an outcast. I know — big surprise. Okay, so I did some drugs then, too, but the thing is, people *treated* me like I came from another planet. People like you and your friends. Of course, *not* like you and your friends, 'cause from what I've seen, you seem like good people."

Then he frowned. "Your buddy is a little scary, but he's probably okay, too. But anyway, I got treated like a goon so much, no matter how I acted after that, people still treated me like a goon. So eventually I became one. But sometimes I wonder: If the other students hadn't treated me like that, would I be that weird today?" He paused and nodded slightly. "You know what I'm getting at?"

"If it's a problem," Keith asked, less than sympathetically, "why don't you just stop acting weird?"

Mel threw his hands up in resignation. "It's too late. I'm me already." He sighed. Leaning his chin on his hands, he seemed to become depressed.

Then he shook it off and smiled. "All I'm saying is, if you tell your friends this stuff, then they'll start treatin' you like a weirdo, and next thing you know, you'll end up like me!" This time Keith was able to laugh. "Listen, if it'll make you feel better, I'll see what I can find out about 'Mysteria. Who knows? Maybe something wacky is going on. That'd be a kick, huh? Stop by the pushcart later this week."

"I will," Keith replied. "Thanks. I'll probably wake up tomorrow and feel like an idiot for telling you all this."

"Nah, don't sweat it," Mel said as he rose from the table. "But I gotta go now. I'll catch ya later."

Keith left shortly after Mel. The guy was definitely unique, he thought. And strange. But he decided Mel wasn't so creepy after all.

Pulling into his driveway, Keith found the house as dark as when he'd left. His mother hadn't awakened after all. This contributed to Keith's sense of relief — until he approached his bedroom door. After his talk with Mel, he didn't know how he'd react to the poster if it started sending out weird signals again. Or worse, produced another inexplicable image. He turned the knob slowly and pushed the door open. Entering the room, he faced "Mysteria." The poster appeared utterly harmless. Keith relaxed again and changed for bed. Sleep came easily this time, and lasted, unmarred by nightmares, until his alarm woke him for school in the morning.

Chapter 7

Skrag Morton floated up from sleep unwillingly as a dream about two particularly vivacious Doublemint twins faded to black. As he awoke, his last sleep-sensation was that of incredibly fresh breath. He immediately tried to reclaim the dream, but could not make it back to the beach where they lay in the sun. Instead, he was in bed, in the dark.

An engine revved loudly nearby and the smell of exhaust assaulted his nose. He tried to sit up, but couldn't seem to move. His entire body ached, and when he turned his head toward the clock, his bruised jaw exploded with fireworks. He was just able to make out the time: 3:30 a.m.

The pain reminded Skrag of his fight with Mario. He had punched the kid's buttons too hard that time. And the kid had punched back, with his fists. Well, he blew it, thought Skrag. Before the fight, he had told Mario's secret to no one. Afterward, he had told Sandra, because she demanded an explanation. But as of tomorrow, the whole school would know. The cat would be out of the bag entirely. And scratching in the litter box.

After dropping Sandra back at the coffee shop so she could pick up her car, he'd returned to the ramshackle Elm Street house he rented. He had celebrated the trouble he was about to cause with a six-pack of beer (or two — he couldn't quite remember) and fallen asleep. Some would call it passing out, but he liked to think of it as hard sleep.

Recalling the evening had almost put Skrag back to sleep. But outside, the engine roared again, and this time the sound brought him fully awake. It was the engine of his own beloved Mustang. Someone was stealing it! He tried to get out of bed, but found he couldn't move. Originally he had thought his sore, stiff muscles were restricting his movement. Now it felt like he was tied down. In the dim light he could see bungee cords wrapped around his wrists and ankles, tethering him to the bedposts. He struggled against them, but could not escape.

"Hey! What's going on? Hey!" he yelled. The engine revved even higher and drowned out his voice. He shouted a few choice swear words, but those, too, were lost in the engine's roar. Exhaust billowed in from the window above Skrag's head. The fumes were so strong, he started to choke. Much more and he'd suffocate.

The engine settled into a rumbling idle. The exhaust thinned out and Skrag could breathe again. He waited to hear the car pulling away, the engine noise fading as it drove down the street. But nothing happened. It merely sat there, idling. If the car wasn't being stolen, then what was going on? he wondered. And why was he tied up?

Fear suddenly pulled him under like a riptide.

"Hey!" he yelled. "Is somebody there?"

A car door opened, then slammed shut. Skrag listened. He heard strange noises, but he couldn't identify the source. Some scraping. Clicking. A cord of some kind sliding over metal. Then just outside the window, two sharp clicks, each accompanied by a crackling sound. Bright orange sparks darted into the room and fell. The flow faded as they landed.

"Hey…!" Skrag started to yell again, but stopped when something sharp bit into his left ear. Now he was screaming in pain, struggling against his bonds. It felt as if his ear had been torn off. His eyes flicked to the left, but all he could see was darkness. The pain was excruciating. Suddenly a strong, gloved hand grasped his forehead. Then his scream was choked off as a second gloved hand thrust a coppery-tasting object into his mouth. A spiked vise clenched his tongue. Looking down, he saw a large plastic V-shape extending from his mouth. A red plastic-sheathed cord ran from the shape and out of his sight through the window. The thick smoke of burning flesh rose from his mouth. His screams became nothing but pathetic gargles. Skrag knew what was happening to him.

The revving of his car's finely tuned engine was the last sound Richard «Skrag» Morton heard as his brain surged with electricity.

Chapter 8

"Has anybody seen Sandra?" Carrie asked as she approached Keith and Pam at lunch the next day.

"No," Keith told her. "Why?"

"Well, Mario wouldn't tell me what he and Skrag were fighting about yesterday. I was hoping Skrag had told her something. Did he tell either of you?" Keith and Pam shook their heads no.

Carrie pulled up a chair next to Keith. "I just have this weird feeling today. I don't know what it is?"

Pam nodded seriously. "I'm feeling the same way. I thought I was coming down with a cold or something. But it's not me. It's something else."

Keith shrugged, feeling nothing wrong. In fact, he had felt great when he woke up that morning. Even his embarrassment for last night's strange obsession with the poster didn't bother him much. Just then, the doors to the cafeteria burst open and Mario came running up to their table.

"You guys are not going to believe this," he gasped, out of breath. "Skrag's dead."

Pam went white. "Oh my God!"

"Worse than that, he was murdered. Someone *skragged* Skrag." Mario could not hide the glee in his voice. He sat down heavily next to Carrie. "And listen to how they did it: hooked him up to his own car battery with jumper cables and fried the sucker."

"Oh, no!" cried Carrie. She was close to tears.

"My bet is some drug deal went down bad, and they cooked his goose, but for real."

"How can you talk like that?" Carrie demanded of Mario. "Someone died. So what that you didn't *like* him, you don't have to enjoy what happened." Tears streamed down her face. She rose quickly from the table and ran from the cafeteria.

Mario swore to himself. "Sorry, guys. We'll be right back." He left the table to follow Carrie.

"Keith?" Pam's voice floated to him as if from a great distance. "Keith, what's wrong?" Panic edged her voice.

The moment Mario had announced Skrag's murder, Keith had gone into shock. He had known. The poster had told him what was going to happen. And even how. The V-shaped object, he now realized, had been the jumper cable handle. He had known — and done nothing. Keith's consciousness retreated to a far corner of his mind, fleeing the implications of what and how he had known. He felt pressure on his shoulder and was shaken roughly. Then he heard a voice, Pam's voice, loud and close to his ear:

"Keith, the police are here. They're taking Mario away!"

That broke Keith's stasis and he returned.

The cafeteria rotated crazily around him, then clicked into proper orientation. He reached up and placed his hand over Pam's. She pointed out the cafeteria windows. They ran over and looked out on the parking lot.

Mario was not handcuffed, but two police officers walked closely on either side of him. One opened the back door of a squad car and motioned for Mario to get in. Keith threw open a window and called Mario's name. He caught only a glimpse of his friend's face as the officer closed the door. In that moment, Keith saw fear and desperation. The police ignored Keith's shout, as well as the shouts of the other students. The officers climbed into the squad car and drove away.

"What happened?" Keith asked Pam.

"After Mario walked away, the police stopped him at the entrance to the cafeteria. I guess they asked him to come with them." Her words were delivered between sobs. "I thought you were paying attention, but you were, I don't know, *gone*. Completely gone. What's happening, Keith?" Pam was at a total loss.

"I don't know," he replied. "But where's Carrie? We have to find her."

"Right," said Pam, straightening up. "I'll check the rest room." Pam found her there, and within minutes, the three reconvened in the cafeteria.

"It's because of the fight last night," she told them. "Everybody saw it."

"Could they really suspect him?" Pam asked, wide-eyed.

"I guess. But getting into a fight and cold-blooded murder are two different things," she said. "Besides, we all know Mario. He wouldn't do something like that. The police will figure that out. They're not that dumb."

"Except for one thing," Keith said hesitantly. "You remember where he comes from, and how he was when he got here. For all we know, he may have a record."

Carrie turned to him, suddenly fierce. "What do you mean by that? We don't know that he has a record."

"Right, but that's because he won't talk about his past. Maybe it's something he's been hiding."

"In that case, we have to do something," Carrie concluded.

"I can call my dad," Pam offered. "He can get Mario a good lawyer. He knows lots of lawyers."

"Great," said Keith. "I mean, he probably won't need a lawyer. They'll ask him some questions, and then let him go. But you never know."

"I'm cutting the rest of the day," Carrie announced. "I'm going to go down to the police station and keep a vigil. You guys coming?"

"I'll go with you," Pam told her. "I can call my father from there. Come with us, Keith."

"I'll meet you there," he told them. They started to protest, surprised that there could be anything more important than rushing down to the police station. But they didn't know about the poster, and he couldn't tell them. Even if he did, they wouldn't understand. "Trust me, there's something I have to check on. It's important." They asked for an explanation, but he refused to give one. Finally they let him go.

In a few minutes the bell rang, ending the lunch period. Pam left with Carrie, and Keith went off on his own.

Minutes later, Keith arrived at the mall in search of Mel. He had to tell him what had happened. Mel would have to take him seriously now. And they had to work together to figure out what to do with the poster. But when Keith arrived at the Virtu-Illusions pushcart, Mel was not there. Instead, he found a perky female college student tending the cash register.

"Excuse me," he said, out of breath from rushing. "Is Mel coming in today?"

"The scary guy with the dark circles under his eyes?" she asked, wrinkling her nose. Keith nodded. "He got fired. Never came in to work this morning. And the owners said he was stealing money, too."

"Damn!" Keith swore, stomping the ground in frustration.

"Tell me about it," whined the new cashier. "I have to pull a double shift now."

"Do you know how I can reach him?" he asked.

"Nope," she told him. "His phone has been disconnected. No forwarding number. The owners are looking for him. He's in big trouble."

Keith stood quietly for a moment, fighting the urge to yell. He tried to think of what to do. Nothing came to him. His shoulders sagged in resignation. He had no way of finding Mel, and Mel had no way of contacting him. And under the circumstances, Mel might have skipped town.

Keith thanked the cashier and returned to his car. He drove straight to the police station.

Pam and Carrie ran to him as soon as he arrived. They told him that the police had been talking to Mario for almost an hour. Pam's father had promised to find a lawyer, but no one had arrived yet. While they filled him in, Keith noticed Mario's aunt sitting on a nearby bench. She stared straight ahead. At the sound of Keith's voice, she turned toward him. Her expression was one of anger and disillusionment, but it didn't seem to be directed toward him. After acknowledging his presence with a slight nod, she went back to staring straight ahead. Keith went over to her.

"Mrs. Vasquez?" he asked.

She looked up at him solemnly. "Mario's father will be very disappointed," she said.

"He didn't do anything, Mrs. Vasquez," Keith told her.

"I meant, he will be disappointed with me. Mario's father never had any illusions about his son. It was I who thought things would be better if he came to Springwood. But Mario has not changed." She shook her head, deeply ashamed.

"Mario's a good guy, Mrs. Vasquez," he told her reassuringly. "He hasn't done anything wrong." With that, Mario's aunt fixed Keith with an icy stare.

"Of course he has," she told him harshly. "Why do you think they've held him for so long? No doubt they discovered that Mario is a criminal." She paused, letting the information sink in. "If I had not begged his father to send him to me, Mario would have been in jail long ago. For murder."

"What do you mean, Mrs. Vasquez?" Carrie asked, stunned at the revelation. "Mario has a temper, but he'd never kill anyone."

Mrs. Vasquez shook her head slowly. Then she said, "But, dear, he already has."

Nobody could speak. Mrs. Vasquez's eyes were dead. She was serious, utterly serious.

A door opened before anyone could say another word. Two policemen escorted Mario out to the waiting area. His face was gray with fear.

"Mrs. Vasquez? Thank you for coming down. We're sorry for the inconvenience." The officers stopped, allowing Mario to walk forward. His three friends immediately surrounded him. Carrie gave him a hug. Mrs. Vasquez stood, but did not go to her nephew. Instead, she turned toward the policeman who had addressed her.

"Will you need to see him again?" she asked quietly.

"Hard to say at this point. He's not in any trouble. Let me make that clear. But we may need to speak to him again." He seemed sincere. Keith glanced at Mrs. Vasquez to see if the news affected her. It did not. Her expression remained grave.

"He will be available," Mrs. Vasquez told the officer. "Come with me, Mario." He went to her side without a word. She turned and started out the door. Mario quickly mouthed the words *Call me*. The other three teenagers nodded, then watched Mario fall into step next to his aunt.

"What was that all about?" asked Pam.

"I don't know," Carrie said, "but I just don't buy that Mario is a murderer."

"Me neither," agreed Pam.

Keith nodded his head and hoped the others would accept that as agreement on his part. But in truth, he wasn't sure. Something terrible had happened in Mario's past. He could tell by Mrs. Vasquez's eyes. And by the way Mario wouldn't talk about his life before Springwood. But the poster had shown him Skrag's death before it had happened. And before that, his nightmare had shown him a violently out-of-control Mario. Could his dream be as accurate as his vision in the poster? He hoped not, but he really didn't know what to believe.

Chapter 9

Keith was exhausted by the time he returned home that afternoon. The general stress he had been under, coupled with the day's excitement, had worn him out. His head ached, so he went up to his room, took a couple of Tylenol, and lay down for a nap. Less than an hour later, the phone rang, waking him up.

"Yeah?" he asked groggily.

"Hi, Keith. It's Carrie."

He sat up, instantly awake. "Is something wrong?" "No," she said quickly. "No, not really. I was just wondering if you'd come over."

"Sure," he replied suspiciously. "What's up?"

"I know how this is going to sound, but I need you to look at my car." She spoke quickly, before he could interrupt. Then she started to cry. "I barely made it home from the police station. I'm sorry. I feel so weird calling you. But my car's dead, and you're the only one I can call now." Her voice hitched and she became frantic. "I'm stuck at home, I need someone to talk to, but Mario's aunt isn't letting him on the phone. This is driving me crazy."

"I'll be right over," he said when the tears finally overcame her.

Keith hurried over to her house. When he pulled into her driveway, he saw Carrie at the front door, waiting.

"I feel so terrible about this…" she began as he approached, but he wouldn't let her finish.

"Don't think about it. Now, tell me what the car's doing."

She breathed deeply, resolving not to cry. "It started making this hissing noise, and now it won't idle," she told him. "It stalls at almost every stoplight."

Keith asked her to start the car while he looked under the hood. It didn't take him long to discover that leaking oil had rotted some tubing leading to the carburetor. After Carrie turned off the engine, he cut out the bad section of tubing and temporarily patched the connection.

"We'll have to go down to the auto parts store to get new tubing, but it doesn't have to be done immediately," he said. Keith could tell there was

much more on her mind than her car. He wouldn't rush her, though. That never worked with Carrie. She watched him as he put his tools away.

"How did you learn about cars?" she finally asked.

"Taught myself," he replied.

"Why?"

"Because I had no one to teach me." He closed the lid of the toolbox. "Cars were something I grew up thinking a kid learned from his father. Well, when I realized *that* wasn't going to happen, I decided to figure it out for myself."

"That's amazing." She seemed truly impressed.

Keith just shrugged. "I think I'd be better at it if I had learned from someone who knew. Like my father. But I guess I do okay."

"Not every guy knows how to fix cars," she told him. "Mario couldn't have done that."

"Yeah, well, people learn different things," he replied. "Mario doesn't talk about his father much, but I bet he taught him something."

"What makes you think your father would have taught you about cars?" Carrie asked.

Keith shrugged again. "I don't *know* what I would have learned from my father. That's why I've taught myself so many different things. I guess I've been hoping to stumble upon my one true talent. So far, I haven't found it. I'm a consistent runner-up, still looking for the blue ribbon." Now he was embarrassed. This issue had never come up while they were dating. "Do you think I'm fooling myself, using the fact I was raised without a father as an excuse for being mediocre?"

"But you're not mediocre," she gently insisted. "How many people can do half the things you can do?"

"Not many, but there's always someone who's better than me. Like Skrag with cars, Mario at wrestling. Heck, Pam's a better athlete than I am. Even Sandra. She blows me away academically."

"What about me?" Carrie asked. "How am I better than you?"

Keith was embarrassed to say. "You're just more… uh…" He began to stutter, then stopped talking and steadied himself. "You're just more… wonderful."

"What a sweet thing to say," Carrie said, moved by his sincerity.

Keith laughed nervously. "Of course, that means I think I'm okay myself. Pretty shallow of me, huh?"

"You're not shallow, Keith," she declared. "Insecure sometimes, sensitive, and definitely thin-skinned, but not shallow. And not mediocre." Then she became very serious. "And you are wonderful. I don't know what I would have done this afternoon if you hadn't come over. Whatever's happened in the past, you're very important to me. And I'm not the only one who feels that way. Mario feels it, and I'm sure Pam does, too. You've brought us all together, Keith."

He almost choked at the thought of himself bringing them together — her and Mario.

Carrie noticed the look on his face and seemed to read his mind. "You know what I mean. Regardless of who's dating whom, you'll be the one holding our group together." She waited for him to reply. But all he could do was stand there and blush. Carrie changed the subject.

"Now, what makes you think Mario killed Skrag?" she asked bluntly. The question hit him like a body blow.

"I never…" he began to protest.

"No, you never did say that," she interrupted. "But you've been acting strange, like you've been hiding something. And rushing off like you did today. Do you know something about it?"

Keith was suddenly on guard. He was not prepared to tell her about the poster.

"I don't know anything," he told her. "It's been a weird day. I mean, we're talking about Mario killing someone. Isn't that enough to make any of us act strange?"

Carrie didn't answer him immediately. That was when Keith realized she wasn't really discussing his doubts about Mario, but her own.

"What do you think?" he asked her carefully.

She looked away, then took another deep breath. "Mario's been acting strange, too," she finally said. "For the last couple weeks. He's not been home when he's usually home. He's been secretive. And he's been getting angry very easily. I've been ignoring it, hoping it would go away. Then the fight with Skrag, who ends up dead." Carrie searched Keith's face for an explanation.

"Do you think he did it?"

"That's just it. I don't know. He's focused a lot of anger on Skrag lately. Maybe he got involved with Skrag somehow…"

"Mario and Skrag doing business?" he asked, interrupting her. "He always said Skrag reminded him of punks from his old neighborhood."

"You saw Mario's aunt at the station. She wasn't surprised. Hell, she said he had killed someone before. Maybe he had a — I don't know — a relapse or something. Besides," she said quietly, "can't you tell he has it in him? I can."

So Mario's demons had been evident to Carrie as well. Keith didn't reply. Carrie was looking to him for support, but it was hard to be the rock when he felt like crumbling himself.

"Carrie," he said, "this has been a tough day for all of us, but most of all for Mario. Maybe we should give it a rest, and give him a chance. Best friends don't turn around and suddenly become murderers. Mario's my best friend. And if you're dating him, he should be your best friend."

"You're right, I know," she told him. "I haven't talked to anyone about this. Who could I talk to but you? This is so confusing… especially with the way he's been acting."

"Maybe he's going through something he hasn't mentioned yet. But it doesn't mean he killed Skrag." He approached Carrie to give her a hug. "I have to get home for dinner. My mom still doesn't know about my hand, and I should tell her before the insurance bill comes in."

She hugged him long and then kissed his cheek. "I'll call you tonight," Keith said.

"Thanks for fixing everything," she told him, and he left.

*** * ***

Keith's mother was home making dinner when he returned. She saw the brace on his hand and dropped the spatula she was holding. Her reaction was similar to what Keith would have expected if his hand had been amputated. It was a good thing she couldn't tell his ribs were bruised.

But fussing made his mother feel better, so he didn't complain. Overreacting soothed her guilt for not being around more often. During dinner, he told her about Skrag's murder. Her only comment was, "Wasn't he the drag dealer?"

Keith's phone rang while he was in the middle of doing dishes. At first he didn't recognize the voice whispering on the other end of the line.

"It's me," the voice repeated. "Mario."

"Hey, what's…"

"I can't talk long," Mario interrupted. "My aunt's in the bathroom right now. She's not letting me out of her sight tonight, dude. The police were actually pretty cool, but my aunt thinks I'm in trouble."

"Are you?" Keith asked. Mario should have jumped down his throat at the question. Instead, Keith thought he hesitated slightly.

"No — at least I didn't kill anyone, no matter what she told you." He was pleading for Keith to believe him. Then Keith heard a toilet flush in the background. Mario gasped and swore. "I'm outta here, dude. She's letting me go to school tomorrow and I'll tell you all about it then."

"All right, call me if…"

"I'll be okay," Mario said hurriedly, and the line went dead.

After his conversation with Mario, Keith went up to his room. As soon as he entered, he could feel "Mysteria's" presence. It had been waiting for him. He spun quickly to leave, but found himself rooted in place. His eyes were drawn to the picture. Involuntarily his vision blurred. His head began to pound slowly. He tried tearing himself away, but the power of «Mysteria» held him fast. The dots swirled and an image formed. Another face. A new one. This time he saw a woman. By the wrinkles in her face, Keith guessed she was in her eighties, at least. Her eyes were closed in what appeared to be sleep. Her mouth was drawn down at the corners, as if she were experiencing a nightmare.

Then the main force of the headache hit without warning. It violently severed his connection with the poster, and he fell back onto his bed. Lying there, Keith barely had the strength to move. Forcing himself to stand, he stumbled to the bathroom and downed three Tylenol to fight the pain. Through the tangle of his thoughts, one broke free. He had to find Mel. But for now, he couldn't even see straight, so he made it back to his bed and willed himself unconscious so the pain relievers could go to work.

*** * ***

The sun had set by the time Keith awoke. His head still ached, but he could function. In the dim light, Keith noticed the light on his answering machine blinking. He'd been out cold and had slept through the ringing of

his phone. He pressed the play button. After a lengthy rewind, the tape reversed and began to play. A female voice rose from the speaker.

"Keith, it's Sandra." She sounded exhausted and upset. "I… I need to talk to you. It's about Mario. I think he killed Skrag." She broke down entirely. "The police don't believe me. No one believes me. I don't know why you would. But at least you'll listen to me. Won't you? Because I know why he did it. It has to do with you." At this point, she seemed to get ahold of herself. "Meet me at the school tonight at eight-thirty. In the front, by the sign. You know Mario. Maybe you can convince me I'm wrong. I just feel like I'm going crazy. I'll be there at eight-thirty. If I don't hear from you before then, or you don't show up, I'll call again. Please come. Please?" He could hear the sobs beginning again as she hung up.

Keith looked at the clock. It was 8:10. He didn't know Sandra's number off the top of his head. Instead of wasting time, he recorded a new outgoing message on the answering machine.

"This is Keith. Sandra, if this is you and you're at the school, stay there. I'm coming. Otherwise, please leave a message and I'll get back to you as soon as I can." He pressed stop, rewound the tape, and played it back again to make sure he could be understood. As he was leaving his room, the phone rang. He ran back and answered it.

"Sandra?" There was only the sound of street traffic. "Hello?"

A tentative male voice said, "Uh, hello, is, uh, Keith there?"

"Yeah, this is me."

"Hey man, it's Mel. Heard about your friend Skrag," he said. "We gotta talk."

"I know. I was looking for you at the mall today," Keith told him. "And I saw another face tonight."

"Another one?" Keith was alarmed by Mel's eager excitement. "Then we definitely gotta get together. I got some info for you on the poster."

Keith instantly let Mel's odd reaction slide. Information on the poster was what he wanted. But Sandra was waiting for him, so he couldn't talk.

"Can I call you back?" he asked hurriedly. "I have to go out to meet a friend right now."

"I'm at a pay phone." Keith remembered that Mel's phone had been disconnected. "If you're going to be out and around, why don't you stop by later? I'm not doing anything. If," he added suspiciously, "you promise not to tip anyone off to where I live."

"Look, I don't care what you did," he said, frustration growing. He didn't want to be late for Sandra. "But I gotta run. Call back in a few minutes and leave me your address and directions on my machine. I'll check in after I meet my friend and come right over."

"No police. Promise?" Mel asked dramatically. Sheesh, Keith thought. He's acting like he's on the Ten Most Wanted list.

"Promise," he said, and hung up before Mel could speak further. He heard the phone ringing again as he got into his car.

As he drove away, something nagged at Keith. For several minutes he couldn't identify the source. Then he realized that it was Mel's call that he found so disturbing. He had never given Mel his phone number. Or even his last name. So how had Mel known how to reach him?

He suddenly wondered if he should have asked to meet Mel in a public place.

Chapter 10

Keith waited in front of the school for over an hour, but Sandra never showed. He got out and prowled the grounds, thinking maybe she'd taken a walk to work off some steam. But there was no sign of her, and the school's pay phone was out-of-order. He'd try calling her from home later, after he met with Mel.

Half an hour later, Keith parallel-parked on a dark street in a seedy area of Springwood. The smell of rot permeated the air, and trash blew across the cracked sidewalks. The leafless trees seemed to be trapped in a perpetual autumn. Keith's instincts told him he was heading blindly into an ambush. But there was no turning back, he decided.

Keith walked up the main drive of the trailer park. Shabby aluminum and plastic trailers lined up on either side of him like the keys of a poorly maintained piano. Strong odors of spicy foods wafted from partially opened windows. At times, the odors seemed to be trying to outstink one another.

He finally came to Mel's trailer. It was set apart from the rest and surrounded by a larger plot of weeds and gravel. It looked like Mel had gotten himself a deluxe trailer lot.

As Keith approached the trailer door, he heard the sound of a running shower. That was a new wrinkle, Keith thought. He never would have figured Mel for the kind of guy who actually bathed. On the other hand, maybe coincidence had brought Keith over the one night of the month when Mel did practice personal hygiene. Whatever the case, Keith was early and Mel was not ready. The feeling of walking into an ambush was still strong, and Keith decided it wouldn't hurt to stay outside and check around first.

A good-sized storage shed sat near the back end of the trailer. It looked like a good place to start. He opened the shed door, and the weak rays of the trailer entry light illuminated a few items within. The usual assortment of tools leaned into corners or hung from hooks or a Peg-Board. He could make out a hoe, a rake, an ax, and other gardening equipment. As his eyes adjusted, he made out other shapes against the shed's back wall. They appeared to be ovals, with jagged edges. At first he thought they were shark jaws, like he had seen in movies.

He stepped forward to look at them more closely, a spiderweb hit him in the face. Sweeping it out of the way with his hand, he realized it was a little thick for a spiderweb. Reaching up, he found a string and pulled. A low-wattage bulb lit up the shed with a sickly yellow light. Now he could see the contents of the shed clearly. Most of the debris cluttering the floor and walls seemed appropriate. But the back wall was something else entirely. Instead of shark jaws, the shapes dangling from hooks were animal traps. Large iron traps like the pioneers used to use. At least three of them were big enough to trap bear. Other, smaller ones of varying sizes hung on nails around the larger ones, like a dangerous constellation.

But why the hell would Mel have bear traps? Keith wondered. Springwood was hardly bear country, let alone trapping country. And somehow, he couldn't see Mel stalking the wilderness in a coonskin cap. Keith half wished he hadn't seen this. His uneasiness had only grown worse. He shuddered and stepped back.

*** * ***

A strong hand gripped his shoulder. He yelled and launched himself forward, nearly landing against the largest bear trap. Laughter came from the doorway behind him, and he spun to face whoever was there.

"Gotcha!" laughed Mel. He wore jeans and a T-shirt, and his hair was wet. Keith immediately felt ashamed for snooping. "You're early."

"Yeah, well, I didn't meet my friend after all," Keith said, catching his breath. "So I thought I'd come straight over."

"Did you knock?"

"Yeah," Keith lied feebly. "But you were in the shower, so I guess you didn't hear me." *And I didn't hear you turn off the water,* he thought to himself.

"Sorry about that," Mel replied amiably. He continued as if nothing were wrong. Then he gestured toward the traps. "Cool, huh?"

"I guess," Keith replied, looking them over once again. "But what are you, some kind of closet Daniel Boone?"

"No," Mel laughed. "I guess not. Actually, I inherited them from a grandfather, if ya can believe that. Nobody else in the family wanted them. I

mean, a million bucks woulda been better, but at least it wasn't a set of china. Y'know what I mean?"

Keith nodded. "I'm really sorry about coming in here," he suddenly blurted.

But Mel didn't seem the least bit upset. "Don't sweat it." He winked conspiratorially.

Keith should have felt relieved, but instead he got the distinct impression that Mel was toying with him.

"I would've done the same thing. Come on inside." He motioned for Keith to follow and led the way across a concrete patio.

The interior of the trailer was messy and depressing, but consistent with Keith's image of Mel. "Sit anywhere," he told Keith. "And if anything's in your way, just throw it aside."

Taking his advice, Keith tossed a pile of clothes onto the floor so he could sit down.

"So what happened to your friend?" Mel asked.

"She never showed," Keith answered him. "You know how that goes."

Mel offered Keith something to drink, but he declined.

"So…?" Keith asked, hoping Mel would launch into an immediate explanation.

But Mel just smiled calmly.

"Anxious, aren't we?" he said, and went into the kitchen.

Keith felt again like he was being toyed with. "Of course I'm anxious. I saw another face — an old woman's. Somebody else may be in danger. If you know anything that might prevent something horrible from happening, I want to know about it."

"Sit down. Relax," Mel told him as he returned from the kitchen. "Tell me something. Do you know who this old woman is?"

"No," Keith admitted.

"Then there's nothing we can do about it, is there?" Mel sipped his beer. "I called Virtu-Illusions' main office. After being kicked around the phones, they finally put me through to their PR department. The woman there said they have about ten guys working on computers spewing out these posters. 'Mysteria' was a joke. One of their artists is quite the prankster. It was never supposed to be distributed. This is the first one that's shown up. It may be the only one; there may be more. She didn't know."

Keith was confused. "I don't get it. What's the joke?"

"Apparently there *is* no picture in 'Mysteria'. "

"But I saw…"

Mel interrupted. "I don't know what you saw, but the woman said the artist created an empty picture to fool people, make them get splitting headaches trying to see a picture that doesn't exist. It's the lemming treatment, so to speak. Anyway, there's more." He paused, with a dramatically raised eyebrow, then continued. "The company wants very much to get it back," he said, his tone indicating that he thought this proved a conspiracy of epic proportions. Then, almost glibly, he added, "Of course, she told me it was only a PR concern. After all, it was a joke that was never supposed to be told. Blah blah blah."

"But I saw two faces in it."

"Well, she claims it's blank. And besides, even if there was a picture, they can't be made with more than one separate image. So there'd still be a problem with your story."

"But I swear I saw them! And Skrag was *murdered*, Mel. Just like in the poster."

Mel smiled slyly. "Yes, he was." Then the smile melted away. "But I couldn't tell her about that, could I? She kept asking for my name. I wouldn't give it, of course. Maybe you're holding on to some dirty secret of theirs."

Instead of answering Keith's questions, Mel was only raising more. What could the company have done to create a poster like «Mysteria»? And why would they want to?

"Listen, if it bugs you that much, get rid of it," Mel said, as if that would be the easiest thing in the world to do. "I can give you that woman's number if you want. They'll mail you a postage-paid label and everything. Even pay you a reward. At least that's what she told me." Then Mel's eyes narrowed. He leaned forward, his casualness not quite masking a leap in his intensity. "Let me buy it off of you. That way, it's out of your hands, but it hasn't fallen into the *wrong* hands." Then he leaned back and laughed, completely casual again. "And if you miss it, I'll let you come visit."

"I don't know," Keith replied carefully. Mel was up to something. "Wouldn't that be like cursing you?"

Mel nodded appreciatively. "I guess so, but then, I deserve it. I cursed you in the first place. So you can get me back."

"But you didn't do it knowingly."

The devilish smile returned. "How do you know?" Mel asked. And for a moment, Keith was certain that he *had* done it on purpose. But then Mel burst out laughing. "Boy, this thing has really got you going," he chuckled. "So let me have it, and you won't have to worry anymore."

Keith frowned. He saw now that Mel had been playing on his fears, trying to frighten him into giving up the poster. Did he want whatever reward the company was offering? Or did he have some other purpose?

"I can't give it to you," Keith said firmly. Mel was clearly disappointed. "I should follow this thing through. I could use your help, but it's up to you. I'm keeping the poster." It felt good to stand firm about something. He wasn't sure about his next step, but he knew it would not be a side step.

"All right, I understand," Mel told him. "But maybe you should bring it here." Keith tensed up. "Don't worry, I'm not gonna coldcock you and take off with it. It'd just be easier for me to figure out what was going on with it if I could see it."

"But you didn't notice anything strange before you sold it to me," Keith pointed out.

"I know, but maybe I will now that it's started doing whatever it's doing."

"I'll think about it," Keith said. Mel seemed willing to let the matter drop. After a moment of silence, Keith rose to leave. There seemed to be nothing else for the two of them to discuss.

"Thanks for your help," he said, awkwardly offering Mel his uninjured hand. "Maybe I'll stop by with the poster later in the week."

Mel stared at his outstretched hand with surprise. "You're not leaving already, are you? Suck me dry of information, then toss me aside?"

Keith didn't know how to respond. Mel's agitation appeared genuine.

"I should get home now," Keith told him finally.

Mel shook his head. "That's pretty cold. I do this for you, offer you a beer — which you refuse — tell you what you want to know, and you're not even gonna hang out?" Keith suddenly felt very self-conscious. "I guess I shouldn't be surprised that you're just a user like the rest of them. But you came looking for *me*. You asked *me* for help. I gave it to you, now you run off. I thought you were cool, man."

"Uh, I am cool," Keith replied stupidly.

Mel's tense expression eased a bit. "Then why don't you hang for a bit. You don't have to have a beer. Just hang. All scary posters and no play makes Keith a dull boy."

Keith felt guilty. While Mel's sudden shift of behavior was unnerving, it was understandable. Not only had he selfishly pumped Mel for information, he had been caught snooping. And Mel had even forgiven him. Now he was just going to take off, without regard to how accommodating Mel had been. It was rude — and stereotypical. No doubt this was how Mel had been treated in high school. So Keith sat down.

"Glad you could stay." Mel smiled, affable again. "Don't get a chance to just hang out very often. You can guess I don't have tons of friends. Sure you don't want a beer?"

"Yeah, I'm okay." Keith was aware he was being played by Mel. But even though he had overreacted the abandonment scene, Keith guessed it had genuine roots.

"That dream your girlfriend had was pretty spooky," Mel said lightly. "Freaky stuff." He took another swig of his beer.

"You were eavesdropping on us?" Keith asked, shocked.

"Not really," he said with a little annoyance. "I mean, I heard the whole Dream Exchange thing, but I didn't *plan* on listening. I was in the place before you were," he explained. "I saw you, but you didn't see me. You were too wrapped up in your friends. I came over to talk to you, but Pam — is that her name? — was telling her wolf dream and I didn't want to interrupt. And after that, I never really got a chance to say anything, because right after that last dream — the one with the angry mob — the fight started. You just never noticed me standing there."

"You should have said something," Keith told him, uncomfortable with the thought of having been watched for so long without knowing.

"Like I said," Mel told him, "I really didn't get a chance. And I didn't want to intrude." He took a long drink from his bottle. "Besides," he admitted, "I was a little afraid you guys would want nothing to do with me. Too bad, I had a dream all ready to tell, too. I figured it'd be the price of admission."

"Price of admission to what?" Keith asked.

"To your group," Mel told him. "But oh, well, maybe next time." He sighed and finished the last of his beer.

"So what was your dream?" Keith asked him. Mel's face lit up as if it were finally Christmas Day.

"I've forgotten most of the details by now, but in this dream, I'm sitting on that chair," he said, pointing to where Keith sat. "I'm watching TV — cable, actually — and every channel is showing war, murders, death, and general destruction. But I keep watching. And here's the thing: I'm smiling. I just can't stop smiling at whatever awful scene is on TV." He stopped and watched Keith anxiously. "So what do you think?"

Keith thought a moment and said, "Well, for one thing, you're *always* smiling. And for another, I think you should stop watching television." Mel's face froze in horror for a moment; obviously he thought that Keith was making fun of him. Then he realized that his new friend was simply trying to lighten the mood.

"Well, now that I've got that off my chest, there's a bunch of things I have to do right now," he told Keith. "So I gotta kick you out. I hope you don't mind."

As Keith stood, he allowed a trace of disappointment to grace his expression.

"I'm gonna see if I can find out anything more about that poster of yours. I'll call you if I do."

"That reminds me," Keith said. "How did you know my phone number? I didn't give it to you."

Mel's expression became a blend of embarrassment and pride. "Actually, I went to your school. Between classes, I sneaked into the library, found a yearbook, and looked you up. Then, I called Information. I hope you don't mind," he added, almost as an afterthought.

"No, I guess not," Keith said.

"Anyway, if something happens — or you just want to hang out sometime — drop by. Maybe I'll see you at the coffee shop and I can meet your friends."

Keith nodded and left, his stomach churning.

Chapter 11

Early the next morning, Keith saw the glow of the stadium lights as he approached school. He wondered why they were on, since the day was perfectly sunny. Pulling into a parking space in the school lot, he noticed red lights flashing on the football field. A fire department ambulance and a hook-and-ladder vehicle were parked beneath one bank of lights, along with a black-and-white police car. A crowd was gathered around them. Keith ran to see what was going on. As he neared the scene, he noticed the fire department ladder extended toward the lights, nearly touching an object suspended before the lights. It was a body. Keith reached the edge of the crowd as two firemen started climbing the ladder.

Someone yelled Keith's name. Looking around, he saw Carrie waving at him. She was with Pam and Mario. He pushed his way toward the front of the crowd and joined them.

The ladder extended to just below the legs of the body. The first fireman up the ladder stood precariously on an upper rung, shielding his eyes from the bright lights with one hand, reaching around the body's waist with the other. In doing so, he brushed one arm against a stadium light, yelled, and recoiled quickly.

"Will somebody turn these goddamn lights off?!" he yelled down.

"What the hell happened?" Keith asked his friends.

"No one knows," Mario told him. "Looks dead to me.

"Do they know who it is?" Keith asked, not sure he really wanted to know.

"Not yet," Mario said. "The fire department just got here."

Finally the lights were turned off and the firemen could proceed. For the first time, Keith could see more than just a silhouette. But the view only lasted a second as the fireman wrapped a tarp around the corpse. The body had surely been that of a female. And Keith thought he had glimpsed a leather jacket. Her feet stuck out from the bottom of the tarp and he could see sneakers and the ragged cuffs of jeans. The second fireman held the body at the waist while the first cut the dark cord from which it was suspended. It looked like the cord had been tied around her neck. They slowly carried the body down the ladder.

About halfway down, the lower fireman missed a rung and slipped. To keep himself from falling, he grabbed the ladder, releasing the body. The crowd gasped as the body swung away from him. The higher fireman was pulled off balance then, and he, too, released his hold on the body. Screams rose from the crowd as the body fell to the ground with a sickening thud. A police officer dove out of the way just in time. The tarp had come loose during the fall, and now the body was facedown and completely uncovered. Keith felt his head swim, just as it had when Mario had announced Skrag's murder. This time it was Carrie's voice that brought him back to reality.

"Oh my God!" she screamed beside him. "Sandra!" She pushed through the crowd toward the body. Keith immediately followed.

Carrie clawed at the police officers who tried to keep her from Sandra. "I know her, damnit!" she wailed at them. They finally yielded, also allowing Keith through. Carrie fell to her knees beside Sandra, sobbing. Keith crouched next to Carrie and put his arm around her.

A bear of a man in a police uniform approached them.

"I'm sorry about your friend," he told them. "What was her name?"

Carrie tried to answer but was completely overcome.

"Take your time, miss," he told her sympathetically.

Then the police officer, whose badge read FARTHING, turned to Keith. Keith took a few deep breaths and told the officer Sandra's name.

"Are you sure?" Officer Farthing asked.

"Yeah, definitely," Keith told him dully. It was a continuous effort to fight the gray fog that threatened to smother his mind.

"Miss, you may want to look away. We have to be absolutely certain." He put both hands on Sandra's body, preparing to turn her over. Carrie regarded him like a frightened animal, but would not look away.

"Okay. Is this your friend Sandra?" And he flipped the body face-up.

After a moment of pure shock, Carrie started screaming. The front of Sandra's clothes were scorched, burned through in some places. Bloodstains splotched her jeans and shirt. The cord had cut into her neck, and blood had spilled from the wound. Much of her hair had burned away from her face. But the face was the worst. It was shriveled and dry, cracked and peeling. Sandra had the face of the old woman Keith had seen «sleeping» in "Mysteria."

"It's her," Keith choked out. Officer Farthing covered her corpse. He motioned for the paramedics to take it away.

"What happened to her?" Carrie said, her voice shaking, her face streaked with tears.

"I'd say she was severely beaten, then hung out to dry. Literally. "She's been up there all night, and those lights are hot. Leave something in the oven long enough, and it'll shrivel up to nothing. That's what happened to your friend."

Then Officer Farthing got an odd look on his face, as if he had noticed something in Keith's expression. "You know something about this, kid? Does this have anything to do with that murder we had the other night?"

"Sandra was Skrag's, uh, Richard Morton's girlfriend," Keith said robotically.

"Any reason why someone'd want to kill them?" Farthing asked.

Keith simply shook his head. He felt drugged. Carrie finally spoke up. "Him, yeah. He was a drug dealer or something." Officer Farthing nodded. "But she wasn't like that. She was a straight-A student, for chrissakes!" Carrie started sobbing again.

Keith wrapped his arms around her. Suddenly he realized that Mario and Pam were nowhere in sight.

Officer Farthing pulled out a notepad and scribbled something on the top sheet. He tore it off and gave it to Keith.

"I know this is a bad time, but I'm going to want to talk to you both later. Here's my number at the station. Call me, even if you have nothing new to say. I'd at least like to make sure you're all right."

Both Keith and Carrie agreed to call. Officer Farthing motioned them to leave then.

Keith kept his arm around Carrie as they walked away. By this time, the police had succeeded in dispersing all but the most persistent of gawkers.

They found Mario and Pam together in the parking lot. They both looked quite shaken, Mario more so than Pam. Beyond them, Keith noticed many empty parking spaces. Students and faculty were leaving.

"They called off school today, dude," Mario told him. Keith looked closely at his friend. He could tell something was happening behind Mario's eyes.

"Was it her?" Mario asked.

"Yeah," Keith said. "You know, she called me last night." They all looked at him sharply.

Keith looked at Mario and spoke carefully. "She said she knew who killed Skrag, and why."

Fear and anger burned in Mario's eyes. "I swear I didn't do it," he said.

"She told you Mario did it?" Carrie asked in total disbelief.

"Yeah," Keith said, still looking at Mario. "But then she changed her mind and wouldn't tell me why. But I imagine it had something to do with the fight. What was that fight over, anyway, Mario?"

"Oh, Skrag was just talking shit," he said abruptly.

"Is there a problem, Mario?" Carrie said quietly. "We're your friends. We can help you."

Keith and Carrie stared at Mario. Pam looked up at him, silent and pale. His hand gripped his forehead. He started to walk away, but Carrie reached out a hand to stop him. He spun around again, his expression wild now, like the face of a trapped animal.

"Look, I didn't like Skrag. And lately, he was on my case about something. But that something is the reason why I couldn't have killed him. My motive is my alibi, guys. You see what I mean?"

Keith's eyes narrowed to slits as a glimmer of understanding dawned on him.

"Where were you when they were killed?" Keith asked in a low voice.

Tears welled in Mario's eyes, but he remained silent. Finally Pam spoke.

"He was with me," she said quietly.

Keith erupted in fury, leaped at Mario, and slammed him against his car. Mario didn't make a move to defend himself.

"You bastard!" Keith screamed, grabbing Mario by the collar. Mario's hands hung limply at his side as Keith battered him again and again against the side of the car.

"What am I? A farm team for your girlfriends, Mario?" he yelled. "Is that it?" Like a viper, he turned on Pam. "And you?" He pounded his bruised hand on Mario's car. The pain brought on the tears that had been waiting. "Dammit!" he screamed.

"Keith, don't…" Carrie said, reaching for his shoulder. He roughly shook her away.

"You stay away, too. Let's talk again in about six months and you can tell me how it feels to be dumped and alone."

Carrie recoiled as if he had punched her. And he was glad. She turned and began to cry. He looked around himself and felt good, for once, that he was speaking his mind instead of politely bowing out and being impotently understanding.

The feeling lasted until Mario blindsided him and pinned him up against a car.

"You finished now?" he hissed. Keith saw the evil Mario before him, totally revealed. " 'Cause I'm in trouble, dude, bigger trouble than if I stole a dozen of your girlfriends. Sandra may have told the police that she thought I killed Skrag. Maybe she told them that Skrag saw me and Pam together and threatened to blow the whistle on us." He released Keith and backed away.

"Pam and I wanted to tell you ourselves, both of you. But Skrag was such a dick about it; that's why we got into that fight. But hell, I'm in high school. You think I'm gonna go around killing someone because I've been caught cheating on my buddy? No one would believe that *you'd* do something like that. They'd laugh. But I'm me. I come from the barrio, and as far as the police are concerned, I'm totally guilty."

He laid this out to them, prepared for whatever their judgment might be. Taking a deep breath, he continued. "What my aunt told you is both true and untrue. The people I hung out with killed someone. I saw it happen. But I didn't know it was going to happen. As far as my father was concerned, I pulled the trigger. My aunt felt the same way, but thought I might be 'rehabilitated. She doesn't feel that way anymore. She thinks I killed Skrag."

"So what's the problem?" Carrie asked. "You were with Pam. She'll vouch for you, and you'll be fine."

"If they believe her. But maybe they'll say she's under my influence."

Carrie frowned.

"Believe me," he pleaded, "I've seen this stuff happen. Especially if the police see you" — he looked directly at Keith — "as angry as you are. If you believe I did it, they might believe it. So I'm asking you, dude, I know I don't deserve it, but help me out. Or I'll fry."

Keith didn't say anything for a moment. Mario's words were strong, but so was Keith's anger.

"This is a hard one," he told Mario. "Because I don't know that you didn't do it. I heard that Skrag was killed sometime in the early morning."

He focused on Pam, who quickly looked away, then he turned back to Mario.

"Either you killed Skrag, or you were with Pam at three in the morning. And I sure as hell don't know which would be worse."

With that, he walked away. They called after him, but he didn't stop. He got into his car and drove off.

Chapter 12

Keith pulled the car over at the outskirts of Springwood. The area was desolate, save for an abandoned factory. He would have kept driving, but tears were blinding his eyes.

He had hoped to come to some great revelation by now, a sudden moment of enlightenment that would carry with it the answers to everything that preyed upon his mind. But Keith's mind raced far beyond any solutions. He knew one thing: If he hadn't had the dream, it would be easier to believe that Mario was innocent. Instead, the dream had foretold both betrayal and violence. And if a terrible future was revealed in the poster, could it not also be revealed in his dreams? Perhaps Mel was right. Maybe the poster was just a catalyst and receiver for Keith's own bizarre ability. And the dream was another manifestation of that ability. But if that was so, then it appeared Mario's demons had broken free.

Keith pounded his steering wheel in frustration. What he was thinking was crazy. Yet what had actually happened was even worse. Just short of convincing himself that his best friend was a murderer, Keith's mind wheeled around and headed in the other direction. Mario had seemed terrified of being arrested, and sincere in his claim of innocence. But that was the problem, wasn't it? Things were less and less what they seemed these past few days. He didn't know what to believe anymore. And his temporary retreat to gain perspective was not helping one bit.

He threw the car back in gear and floored the accelerator. Tires spun and kicked up a cloud of dust as Keith pulled a quick U-turn and headed back into town.

* * *

Keith arrived home at lunchtime. As he expected, his answering machine held so many messages that the light blinked continuously. Keith guessed who might have called, and didn't want to hear what any of them had to say. He pressed play anyway.

Mario, Pam, and Carrie had each left several messages, pleading for him to call them back. At first they merely wanted to talk. As time wore on, and he still didn't answer the phone, they became worried and asked him to call even if he didn't want to talk. They just wanted to know that he was all right. He didn't return any of their calls. His mother had also called. The news of Sandra's death had reached her at the office. Finally, there was a message from Mel.

"Hey, man, heard about what happened at school this morning." In contrast to how he had reacted to the news of Skrag's murder, Mel sounded troubled. "Stop by as soon as you can. I'll try calling you again later."

Keith wondered how Mel had found out about Sandra's murder. It was too soon to be on the news. Even if it had been, Sandra's name would not have been released so soon. Of course, Mel had already demonstrated a talent for discovering information quickly. On the other hand, what if Mel was the murderer!

Suddenly Keith had a premonition. In it, he saw the faces of himself, Mel, Skrag, and Sandra as moons orbiting within the gravitational field of a large planet. But instead of a planet, they orbited "Mysteria," and its attraction was not gravity, but evil.

Keith clamped his mind shut against the image. Again he felt as if he had been given knowledge denied to others. Knowledge he preferred not to have.

The only person Keith could think clearly about was his mother. When he returned her call, she immediately offered to leave work early so he wouldn't have to be alone. After a long discussion, he finally talked her out of it, insisting that he did want to be alone for a while. She finally relented, but said she'd rush home right after work.

Keith was glad his mother hadn't insisted on coming home. He really did need to think. He glanced back at the poster, which he had scrupulously avoided looking at until now. Again it seemed at first glance to be an ordinary poster, radiating none of the sinister energy he had felt before. He wondered how it would make him feel if he touched it. His hand came within inches of the frame before he pulled back. He didn't want to find out; he didn't want to wake it up inadvertently. It might show him something he didn't want to see.

His phone rang. He let the answering machine pick it up and listened.

"Hello, Keith," came a familiar voice. "This is Officer Farthing down at the station. Please call me when you return. I'd very much like you to come down and make a statement. I've called your friend Carrie, and thought maybe it'd be more convenient if you came down together." He left the same number he had written down earlier, thanked Keith, and hung up.

Keith ignored the message and left his room. The police were the last thing on his mind right now. There was nothing he could tell them. For now, he had a lot of thinking to do. Looking at the poster, he knew his room wasn't conducive to concentration.

Sometimes, he remembered, the best way to solve a problem was not to think about it. Certainly, obsessing had not yet brought him to any conclusions. So he went downstairs to the living room and picked up a book. It was perfect: a cheesy — and undemanding — romance novel of his mother's. Sitting on the couch, Keith began to read. His phone rang, but he ignored it. Fifteen minutes later, it rang once more, so he turned off the ringer. Now he could just focus on reading. Hopefully his turbulent mind would calm, allowing him to think clearly.

* * *

Keith looked up from the book again when he heard the front door open. Keys jingled and his mother's voice called his name.

"I'm here," he answered, closing the book and rising from the couch. He found her in the kitchen.

"Where have you been?" she asked. "I called a couple times, but you didn't answer the phone."

"Sorry. I've been reading, and I unplugged the phone," he told her.

"Well, I was so worried. I almost left work early." She watched him closely, obviously concerned. He tried to play it cool.

"I'm really sorry," he repeated. "I just haven't wanted to talk to anyone today."

"I understand, honey," she said sympathetically. "How are you doing now? Have you eaten anything all day? I'll make us some dinner. Marinated chicken breast, okay?" She knew it was his favorite.

"Sounds good," he said, smiling as enthusiastically as he could. "I'm gonna go upstairs and finish my book. Call me for dinner."

"It'll be ready in about an hour," she said, looking at her watch. "Six-thirty."

Keith went up to his room. He didn't like to hang around while his mother worked in the kitchen. Besides, the reading had done him good. He felt calmer, and better able to face the poster, if necessary. He listened to the messages he had amassed over the afternoon. Two were the ones from his mother. There was one more from Mario, and a lengthy message from Carrie.

"Officer Farthing called me," said her taped voice. "He wants me to come in, but I don't want to go until I talk to you. They took Mario in a few minutes ago. His aunt said they sent a car. That's not a good sign." She paused. "Look, I'm hurt, too. But I talked to Mario. What he and Pam did was stupid — they even had this crazy plan — but that's beside the point. Mario did not kill anyone. I know it. And you have to know it. Look at it this way. If you weren't so angry with Mario, would you think he'd done it?" Again she paused. "We've got to help him. I'll wait a while longer for your call, but if I don't hear from you, I'm going in. I've got to do what I can, whether you will or not. But it would be better if we did this together." Her voice trailed off". She seemed about to continue, but then just hung up.

Carrie was right. He could never sustain his suspicion of Mario if it weren't for his anger. And if Mario had been taken down to the police station, now was the time to make things right between them. He dialed Carrie's house, but the answering machine answered instead.

"This is Keith calling for Carrie," he said after the tone. "You're right about Mario. I don't think he killed anyone. I'm still mad at the bastard…" He stopped, realizing her parents might listen to this tape, but it was too late. "Ooops," he laughed sheepishly, "sorry about that. Anyway, I'm on my way to the police station."

Unintentionally he turned toward the poster as he hung up the phone. He became suddenly and painfully aware of its presence, as if it had begun screaming at him. He eyes locked in on it against his will, and it drew him a step closer. The receiver fell from his hand and onto the floor.

"Oh my God!" Keith muttered as a new face appeared. This one nearly leaped out at him, mouth gaping, eyes ovals of fear, shapes like flames in the background. For the first time, Keith recognized the person immediately. It was Mario. As soon as the realization hit, the poster abruptly released him. Keith collapsed onto the floor, stifling a scream as he

clutched his head in pain. It took several seconds before he could open his eyes. When he did, he noticed the receiver lying next to him. There was no dial tone. The connection with Carrie's answering machine had not been broken.

"Carrie," he gasped into the receiver. The pain was so great, he could hardly speak. "If something goes wrong, and I miss you at the station, *find Mario.* And when you do, stay with him. Don't let him out of your sight. He's in danger. I can't explain, but trust me, I know. The poster I bought, 'Mysteria. I saw their deaths, Skrag's and Sandra's. But I didn't believe it. Now I've seen Mario's." He stopped and tried to catch his breath. "I know it sounds crazy, but believe me. Maybe we can stop it — or whoever's doing this — if we're with him. I don't know." He ran out of things to say. He had to get going. "I'm heading to the station now. I hope I see you there." He hung up. There was a light knock at the door.

"C'mon in, Mom," he said, trying to compose himself. She entered tentatively, uncomfortable invading his space.

"Are you okay, Keith? I heard a thump, and…"

"I'm okay, Mom," he told her. "I dropped the phone. They took Mario to the police station, and I have to go down there." He didn't give her a chance to reply. He just pushed past her and ran for his car.

*** * ***

Keith ran into the police station so quickly, all heads snapped in his direction. He thought he saw one officer reach for his gun.

"Mario Vasquez," he told a surprised desk clerk. "Is he here?"

"Vasquez," the clerk repeated dully. "High school kid? Regarding the murders?"

"Yeah. Has he been charged? Are you holding him?"

Despite Keith's urgency, the clerk searched his desk as listlessly as he spoke. He picked up one document, studied it, and then looked up at Keith.

"Nope. Came here, made a statement, and was released. I believe his aunt was with him." He whistled soundlessly as he studied the document once more. "Nope. He was not charged."

"Did you take any other statements?"

"I believe so," answered the clerk. "A coupla girls. They're not here now. Friends of yours?" The clerk, well into his thirties, smiled lecherously. Keith ignored him and ran out of the police station.

Keith drove straight to Mario's house. There were no cars in front. He rang the doorbell anyway, but there was no answer.

"Mario?" he yelled, pounding on the door for good measure. The door did not open.

Panicked, Keith jumped back into his car and screeched away from the curb. He was about to race over to Carrie's house when he suddenly felt his panic turn to reason. Mario could be anywhere in the city. And Carrie had his message, so if she knew anything, she'd call. Keith hated the thought of just waiting around, but there seemed to be nothing else he could do. He headed for home.

As soon as he got in, his mother told him his phone had rung. As they had agreed long ago, she had let his machine answer it. He sped up to his room and listened to the one message. It was Carrie telling him that she and Mario were at the Jaguar diner, having dinner and talking. He should come by, she said. Before the message ended, the phone rang again.

"Keith," said Carrie. She spoke quickly, in a panic. "What's wrong? I just called home. My parents said you left this long message, something about a poster, and Mario being in danger. What's going on?"

"Is he with you?" Keith asked instead of answering.

"He's right here. Now, what's wrong?" she demanded.

"I can't explain it. But stay with Mario. Don't let him out of your sight. And if you see the guy from the mall, call the police!"

"What are you talking about?" she asked. "You're not making any sense."

"I know. Let me talk to Mario. And then I'll be right down."

"But, Keith…"

"Give the phone to Mario!" he yelled. Carrie was only able to utter a squeak of surprise. Then he heard the receiver change hands.

"Dude, what's going on?" Mario asked carefully. "I heard that from three feet away."

"I'll tell you when I get down there. But stay with Carrie until I do," he pleaded. "You're in big trouble."

Mario laughed. "No, I'm not, dude. The police don't think I killed anyone." Then he stopped laughing. "You don't still think I did, do you?"

"No," Keith told him. He could hear Mario's sigh of relief. "And I'm sorry, and we'll talk about that," he said quickly. "But the poster…" he began, gesturing at the poster, even though Mario couldn't see it. "Oh, shit!" he muttered, caught again like a deer between the headlights of an eighteen-wheeler.

"What's wrong, dude?"

Keith could hear Mario's voice, but could not respond. The poster had him again. He braced himself for the headache and gripped the phone tightly. The dots swirled. The smears of color seemed to run into one another. An oval shape formed. A female face. Eyes opened, then closed. No gaping mouth this time, just a line turned sadly downward. Below the chin, the neck ended in a jagged line.

The headache struck, but this time Keith was ready. He did not fall, though the pain threatened to rob him of consciousness. From a great distance away, Keith could hear Mario's muffled voice.

"Keith! Keith, what's happening, dude? You there?"

Slowly Keith raised the receiver to his ear.

"It's Pam," he managed to say. "Pam's next. Is she with you?"

"No, she's out running, probably. Pam's next for what?"

"To die. Maybe. I don't know. I've never seen two images in a row like this. And you're still alive."

"You're scaring me, dude," Mario told him.

"I'm scared, too. But maybe I can save her. I'll go get Pam and bring her to the diner. Whatever you do, *don't leave the diner.* I'll be there soon."

"You're talking crazy," Mario was saying as Keith hung up on him.

Chapter 13

Springwood Park seemed especially quiet tonight. Pam was glad; her runs were as much meditation as exercise. Most of her clear thinking took place then. And tonight she had more thinking to do than usual. Home was not the place for reflection, she had discovered long ago. Too much time was spent countering her parents' attempts to control her. Sure, they were adults, and Pam allowed them a generous amount of say in her life. She had no choice. But they smothered her, and trumpeted their affluence in ways that might make her very unpopular if she didn't keep it under control.

She picked up her pace a bit. Darkness was rapidly descending and she didn't want to be out in it too long. Her parents almost hadn't let her out of the house at all. The murders of Skrag and Sandra had them on edge. Besides, if Mario hadn't done it (and she could tell they thought he *had*), then a killer was still on the loose and could strike again. Their fear was understandable, but Pam's need for space was stronger. In the end, she had used her secret weapon, the phrase "If you loved me…" to escape the house.

They had finally allowed her to take her run as usual, as long as she came home right after. Pam had bolted for the door before they could attach any more conditions.

Now she was outside, running in the cool early evening air. Trees and bushes lined the path; wet leaves carpeted it. An occasional bird called across the treetops. Then a twig snapped somewhere off to her left. Pam skidded to a halt. Something was in the bush just ahead. A squirrel or bird, no doubt. She relaxed and resumed her run.

To be honest with herself (and her parents), she was a little frightened to be out here alone. But the killer was probably some drug supplier of Skrag's, so she didn't feel too threatened. Poor Sandra, she thought. Dating Skrag was supposed to be just a little "walk on the wild side." Who'd have thought it would turn from wild to savage? Pam shook her head. Poor Sandra.

The path bordered a lake for some thirty yards before turning away from it again. The last sunlight reflected off its rippling surface. Pam could see tiny splashes in the water where fish caught insects trapped at the

surface. Now the path inclined as it traced a line just below the crest of a hill that formed the northern border of the park.

The murders aside, Keith was the big problem now. Not that it was his fault. The blame really lay on Skrag. Mario and Pam had meant to be direct. They had realized their attraction for each other a few weeks ago. After several secretive dates, they had realized that this wasn't just an affair, but the beginning of a full-blown relationship. When that happened, it was only a matter of time, they figured, before they would tell Keith and Carrie how they felt. They just wanted to pick the right moment. Then Skrag saw them together one evening. He instantly figured out what was going on, and just to be a jerk, threatened to expose them. Mario was all for telling them right away, to take the wind out of Skrag's sails, but Pam had resisted. She still loved Keith and felt that he wasn't ready to handle the news. So Pam devised The Plan.

Mario didn't think The Plan would work. Pam explained it to him in detail: She thought Keith was still in love with Carrie. She would arrange times when the two couples would «accidentally» bump into one another. Once reintroduced, Keith and Carrie would become friends again. Perhaps they would fall in love again, announce the news to Pam and Mario, and the switchover would take place painlessly.

It might have worked, but Skrag blundered into the picture, taunting and threatening Mario. Mario had taken the threats seriously, had become increasingly defensive, and finally had provoked the fight the other night.

Then Skrag had been killed. When she'd first heard the news, she'd thought immediately of Mario. But in her heart, she knew that Mario had done nothing. That's why she had lied to the police about being with Mario that night. Actually, she'd been home in bed, asleep. Mario said he had been home asleep, too, and she believed him.

Pam ran along the path now at its highest point. Bushes and trees obscured the crest of the hill to her left. To her right, the hill dropped away steeply. This area was mostly barren, save for grass and rocks. There were plans to extend the slope so that children could use it as a sledding area in the winter, but for now it was much too steep.

Pam flinched at the sound of another crackling branch ahead of her, but did not stop. Only another squirrel, she thought. Besides, she had nearly finished circling the park and would be going home soon. No sense in stopping now.

Something heavy suddenly struck Pam in the side and she went flying off the path toward the slope. For a split second she saw a dark shape, a man, above her. Then she was rolling out of control down the hill. Her speed picked up quickly. Pam heard a loud metallic snap and something bit into her leg. She screamed in pain. Seconds later, there came another snap — and more pain, this time around her upper left arm. A rock struck her head and she was dazed for a moment. A snatch of her wolf dream came back to her. Two snaps occurred in rapid succession and her right hand was suddenly paralyzed, along with her left foot. Pam could feel blood pouring from wounds inflicted by whatever was biting her. She was nearly at the bottom of the hill when something very large and sharp attached itself to her upper thigh, teeth severing the artery. Blood shot from the wound like a fountain.

Pam finally landed facedown in the dirt at the bottom of the hill. She was aware of several areas of her body where hard, sharp objects had bitten into her flesh. The weakness from massive blood loss was beginning. At some point during her fall, Pam had stopped screaming. Now she knew that if she didn't start screaming again soon, she'd die out here alone. But she had a face full of dirt. She had to turn over. She tried to rock her body toward her left shoulder, but the objects attached there prevented her from flipping around. She tried harder, but found herself too weak to gain any leverage. Her right hand and arm were nearly useless. Her strength ebbing rapidly, she began to rock toward her right shoulder. She found much less resistance, and her left hand was free to push. On the first try, pain made her black out. But when she awoke, she found she had made it onto her side. Now all she had to do was rock a little more to make it the rest of the way. She did so, and felt herself toppling onto her back.

Immediately Pam felt something hard and flat against the back of her head. As the weight of her head pressed her down on the surface, she heard the sound of a heavy spring uncoiling. She died instantly as heavy metal teeth bit into her flesh, nearly severing her head at the neck.

Chapter 14

Keith nearly fell halfway down the hill. As he regained his balance, he stepped on something. With a snap, something sharp bit into his shoe. He yelped and sat down quickly to avoid losing his balance. Moonlight glinted coldly off the object attached to his foot. He pried apart metal jaws and examined them. If the trap had been any bigger, or the material of his shoes any thinner, his foot might have been broken, or cut off. He stood up and limped down the hill.

He saw the dark shape of a body at the bottom. Panic rising, he ran straight for it. One white running shoe glowed in the dark. A white sweatband lay a few feet away. The moonlight reflected dully off dirty iron in several places surrounding the shape. He slowed his approach, wanting to stave off the answer to yet another horrible question. But he forced himself onward, and finally could not avoid what was obvious. It was Pam, quite dead. He saw her other running shoe. It did not glow in the moonlight. It was soaked in blood.

He could see what had happened to her. A wave of nausea swept over him. Then he turned numb. He didn't cry. He could only stare.

Seconds later, Keith heard footsteps approaching quickly from behind him. Running. He started to rise.

"NOOO!!" came an anguished yell, and before Keith could turn around, he was knocked violently off his feet and held to the ground. Fists hammered at his face and chest. He tried to throw off his attacker, but could not. Then he realized who it was.

"Mario! Stop! It's me, Keith!" he yelled.

"I know it's you, you bastard!" Mario cried. Mario didn't slow his attack.

Keith punched Mario hard in the chest, surprising him. Mario gasped, the wind momentarily knocked out of him. Taking advantage, Keith twisted beneath Mario and used the leverage to throw Mario away from him. Mario landed on his back a few feet away. Before he could recover, Keith leaped, pinning Mario to the ground. He used a standard wrestling maneuver; he wanted to immobilize Mario, not hurt him. Keith only wanted a chance to explain. Mario struggled against him, and knew he was pinned. His eyes

went wide with panic, the same look he had whenever he was about to lose a wrestling match. He bellowed powerfully, as he did in matches just before turning the tables on the opponent. Keith had no hope of withstanding what was to come. Mario used his desperate energy in an attempt to throw Keith off of him.

But Keith didn't budge. Mario had finally been pinned.

"Get off me, dude! Get off me!" Mario ranted. "You're killing me! Get off of me." He went wild, twisting like a trapped, frightened animal, but still Keith held fast.

Keith ignored the incredible feat he had accomplished and stared right at Mario. "I'm *not* killing you. Now, calm down." His voice was strong and even. Something in Keith's gaze suddenly took the fight out of Mario. He froze. "I didn't do this. But I know who did. I know who killed all of them." Mario seemed too scared even to blink. "It was Mel," Keith declared.

Confusion finally overcame much of Mario's fear. "Mel? The poster guy?" Keith nodded, and Mario, seeing that he was telling the truth, stopped struggling. Keith loosened his grip on Mario and helped him stand.

"How do you know?" Mario asked guardedly.

"The guy's nuts," Keith told him. "He told me he was at the coffee shop the night of the fight. He heard the girls tell about their dreams. He didn't like Skrag. And he knew I was supposed to meet Sandra at the school last night."

"But why?" Mario said. He wasn't buying it.

"It's hard to explain," Keith told him. "But we have to get to the police station before he gets to you."

"What are you talking about, dude?" Mario was looking at him like he was crazy.

"Look, I'll tell you later. I've thought Mel's been behind this since this afternoon, but I didn't have proof. But these traps are the proof. They're his. I've seen them in his storage shed."

"You're sure?" Mario asked, his face a blank.

"Absolutely."

Mario's face lit up suddenly, full of hate. "Then let's get him," he growled.

"We should call the police, Mario," Keith pleaded.

"No," Mario told him. He hadn't moved from his spot. "Tell me where Mel lives." Mario's eyes had grown colder than Keith had ever seen. He

was seeing Mario's demons now. They were no longer caged.

"We can't…"

Mario interrupted him. "You don't have to come. But he's mine first." Mario was serious. Deadly serious.

"Okay, but I'm going with you to make sure you don't do something really stupid." Keith wasn't sure he could do anything if Mario lost control, but he wanted to be around to try. Besides, he had seen Mario's face in the poster. He could not let Mario out of his sight until this was settled.

He led Mario to his car and drove them both across Springwood toward Mel's trailer park.

"Why did you come to the park, anyway?" Keith asked him. "I told you to stay with Carrie."

"You sounded weird on the phone. I mean crazy. Talking about me and Pam being in danger. You were scary, dude. You're still scaring me. I mean, how did you get mixed up with this weirdo, anyway?"

"It all has to do with that poster he sold me," Keith started to explain. Mario interrupted him.

"What *is* the deal with that poster? Carrie went home to hear your message for herself. According to her parents, you were ranting and raving."

"Yeah, well, I guess I was," Keith admitted. "I saw your face in it while I was on the phone with her machine."

"My face?"

Keith thought a moment about how to present this. "You're not gonna believe this, but I've been seeing faces in that poster. I saw Skrag, and then Sandra, *before* each of them was killed. Mel was supposed to be helping me figure out what was going on. Then something happened that made me think he was behind the killings after all."

Mario was baffled. "What happened to make you think that?"

"It doesn't matter," Keith told him. "I saw his traps. That's good enough."

"What did Pam ever do to him?" he said, his voice choking with emotion.

"I don't know," Keith replied softly. "All I know is that tonight I saw her face in the poster. And now she's dead. But that's not all of it."

"What else?" Mario asked.

"I saw yours in there, too. That's what I've been trying to tell you." His eyes met Mario's and they both fell silent. Mario looked away.

Instead of parking at the curb, Keith drove straight up to Mel's trailer. He parked the car facing the front door. The trailer's windows were dark. "He's not here," Keith said. "Let's go and call the police."

"Maybe he's hiding." Mario was determined not to leave. "Or if he's not home, we'll wait."

"C'mon," argued Keith, "who knows where he is and when he'll be back?"

"Doesn't matter. He killed Pam." Mario had made up his mind. They both moved to leave the car, but Mario motioned for Keith to stay. Keith didn't want to hang back, but Mario gave him no choice. So he waited, leaving the car running so he could listen to the radio.

Mario silently approached the trailer door and slowly turned the knob. The door was unlocked. Mario carefully opened the door just enough to peer into the trailer.

Stillness pervaded the trailer, completely. In the dim light that shone through the trailer windows, Mario could make out a living room area to his left. He saw the dark outlines of a couch and padded chair. Something twinkled in the chair: light reflecting off a wrist-watch. Worn by Mel.

A smile spread on Mario's face. He had been right. Mel had been trying to pretend he wasn't home.

"I see you, asshole!" he said out loud, and stepped inside the trailer. But Mel didn't flinch. "We're gonna have a little talk. Got anything to say before I beat you within an inch of your life and then turn you over to the police?" Mario laughed cruelly, but Mel seemed to be ignoring him. The feeling that something was wrong finally dawned on Mario. "Let's get some light on the subject," he told Mel, and felt the wall for a light switch. He found it and flipped it up. A lamp near Mel turned on. Mario gasped.

Mel had been tied to the chair and was quite dead. His T-shirt had turned brown from dried blood that had gushed from the wound in his neck. He had been slashed from ear to ear, and the slit curved, giving him the appearance of having a wide, permanent, bloody smile.

Gagging, Mario turned and stumbled out of the trailer. He tripped on the steps and fell to the ground. Using the side of the trailer, Mario finally pulled himself to his feet. He leaned heavily against the corrugated aluminum of the trailer, his mind swimming in horror.

That was definitely not a suicide, Mario realized. Mel had been murdered. If so, then what was going on? He looked out toward Keith's car, but could not see past the headlights. He waved weakly, signaling he was okay, and started to move forward. They had to get to the police now.

The engine of the car roared, freezing Mario in his tracks. With a screech, the back wheels spun, spewing gravel behind them, and the car leapt forward. Mario didn't have a chance. He was struck solidly on the chest and thrown back against the trailer. Despite the pain, he struggled to stand. But before he was fully on his feet, the car struck again, pinning him. Now that he was out of the glare of the headlights, Mario could see the interior of the car. At the wheel was Keith, his face distorted, an almost unrecognizable mask of evil. With insane glee, Keith accelerated, slowly crushing Mario against the trailer.

As the last breath was squeezed from his lungs, Mario managed to croak, "You're killing me, dude." He no longer had feeling below his neck. "I'm dying," he said weakly.

Keith's malevolent smile only widened. Somehow, he had heard Mario's plea over the roar of the engine. "Yes," Keith replied cruelly. "You are." Then Keith started laughing, a deep, horrifying sound. It was not Keith's laugh… or even his voice.

Mario's eyesight faded to black on the image of Keith's twisted face. And the hideous laughter was the last thing he heard before he died.

*** * ***

By now, the commotion had attracted the attention of the trailer park's other inhabitants. Fearfully they gazed from windows, some tentatively leaving their homes and approaching. At the sight of Mario slumped over the hood of the car, someone screamed.

Satisfied, Keith put the car in reverse. He pulled away, leaving Mario's body to drop limply to the ground.

Chapter 15

Keith burst through the front door of his house so violently that his mother let out a shriek. She appeared to have been waiting for him. Her relief at his return was short-lived. His clothes were torn and his face was bruised and cut.

"Keith, what's wrong?" she asked as she came toward him. "Carrie called…"

"Not now, Mom," he growled as he pushed past her and headed toward the stairs. "Leave me alone!" He glimpsed her stunned look, surprise rooting her to the spot.

Keith entered his room and slammed the door shut. The hammer still lay on the floor where Keith had dropped it days before. He snatched it up quickly and attacked "Mysteria," striking the poster with all the strength he could muster. The shock of each blow felt like the recoil of a shotgun blast on his hands. But the glass on the poster did not shatter. His stomach lurched violently. He dropped the hammer again and ran to the bathroom.

He vomited as the memory of what he had done hit him. His stomach continued to heave even after it was empty. The contractions were so violent, he thought his ribs might break.

His bedroom door rattled with frantic knocking.

"Keith, are you all right?" came his mother's frightened voice. "Keith, answer me!"

"Will you leave me alone?" he yelled back. "I'll be down later!"

"But what was that pounding noise?" she cried. "What's going on?"

"Don't worry," he told her ironically, "I didn't break anything. I just need rest. Now, go away!"

He heard his doorknob turn. She was entering his room uninvited.

"Mom!" he shouted at the top of his lungs, and the door slammed shut.

"Okay, okay," She sounded miserable. "I'll be downstairs if you need anything. I'm canceling bridge for tonight." He didn't answer and soon he heard her footsteps moving away.

Supporting himself on his arms, Keith stared into the bathroom mirror. He hardly recognized himself. Dark circles, bruises and cuts from his fight with Mario.

He let his head droop forward. When he looked up again, the mirror's aberration was enlarging one of his eyes in the reflection. He moved so that the features of his face flowed around the distortion. How appropriate, he thought. Then Keith stopped and gave himself a hard stare. The aberration broadened his forehead, and he concentrated on it. Before he realized what he was doing, his eyes blurred and he seemed to be looking deep within the reflection. The features of his face scrambled, then melted away entirely. The space where his face had been became a volcanic mass of featureless flesh. Though the bathroom itself did not change, the lights in the reflection dimmed, then winked out entirely. His faceless reflection floated in blank space.

Then hard lines formed in the reflection beside his face. The shape of a window. Outside the window, a car sat, its engine revving. Below the window, Skrag lay struggling at the cords that held him to his bed. Black gloved hands reached in, one clamping the black jumper cable to Skrag's ear. Skrag attempted to see his attacker, but could not. But from Keith's impossible vantage point, he saw perfectly. He saw himself smiling as he clamped the red jumper cable to Skrag's tongue and withdrew from the window.

The scene in the mirror faded. Soon a new one replaced it. Sandra stood at the front of the school, waiting for him. He arrived, and there she told him about Mario and Pam. They walked as they talked, ending up near the bleachers of the football field, There, he attacked her, and with inhuman strength, carried her body to the top of one bank of lights and hanged her. Before he left, he turned the lights on. Then he went straight to Mel's trailer.

The next scene was from that afternoon. He claimed he'd been reading all day. Instead, he had driven to Mel's one more time, and killed him. He took the bear traps from the shed and, that night, after stopping at the police station, set them all on the slope at the park.

When Mario had found him that night, Keith had just come down the hill seconds after pushing Pam before him. He had expected Mario to come to the park. And he had expected Mario to insist on dealing with Mel alone. If he hadn't insisted, there were contingencies upon contingencies. Mario would have been dead by now, in any case. And Keith was shown the way it had ultimately taken place. After he experienced Mario's murder for a second time, the mirror went black again. His face continued to pulsate.

I killed them all, Keith realized for the first time. I'm responsible! Keith was almost consumed by despair.

"You didn't do it alone, child!" came a voice inside his head. Then laughter, a sound he had heard in his dreams many times. "You did have some help."

The miasma of colors and light on his face began to take shape once more. A sharp, cruel nose. Depraved leer. Eyes of the ultimate predator, cold, unforgiving, deadly. Finally the skin itself became a mass of burned, oozing flesh.

"Say hello to Freddy," said the monster. "Now you're the B.M.O.C. — the Big Murderer on Campus." Freddy laughed. "You've done Daddy proud!"

* * *

Carrie pounded on Keith's door and yelled his name. There was no answer except for the chilling laughter on the other side.

When she had arrived only minutes ago, Keith's mother was beside herself with worry. She said that Keith had gone in his room and was acting very… strangely. Her hesitation indicated she was understating the case. Carrie wondered what his mother would think of the disturbing phone message he had left. When she had played it, Carrie had realized that something was terribly wrong with Keith. After that, she told her parents to call the police and send them to Springwood Park. Without explaining, she jumped in her car and went there herself. Though deep down she knew it was hopeless, she wanted to stop whatever might be happening there. By the time she made it, it was much too late. Pam's body was already cold. But Mario and Keith were nowhere to be found. Returning to her car, she didn't know what to do or where to go. On a hunch, she drove toward Mario's house, but before she arrived, Keith's car zoomed past, running a stop sign. She noticed immediately that he was alone. And by the look on his face, one that chilled her to the bone, she knew Mario's absence was not a good sign. Getting a grip on herself, she followed Keith back to his house.

Carrie calmly told Keith's mother to call an ambulance, and said she would go up to talk to him. Keith's mother did as Carrie suggested without asking for an explanation. As she climbed the stairs, a wail of utter despair

rose from Keith's room. The wail continued, soon turning into a steady stream of maniacal laughter. Carrie's heart raced at the sound. She was almost paralyzed with fear. But she urged herself forward and stood outside Keith's bedroom door. There was no response to her knocking or shouts, so she walked right in.

An overwhelming feeling of *wrong* pervaded Keith's room. The feeling flowed in from behind her, dousing her as if with a bucket of maggots. The laughter came from the adjoining bathroom. She did not want to go in there. She wanted to flee the room entirely. She turned and saw the poster, the poster that Keith claimed had been showing him strange pictures.

A door opened and Carrie turned. Keith walked from the bathroom.

"Keith…" she said, but her voice was quickly drowned out by a burst of laughter.

"You're right, Carrie," Keith said in a deep, utterly alien voice. "He did it. He killed them all." Keith started advancing toward her. "Skrag," he said, and took a step. "Sandra." Another step. "Pam… and Mario."

Carrie tried to stand her ground. "Keith didn't kill anyone. You did… whoever you are." Involuntarily she took a step backward toward the poster. "Who are you?" she demanded.

Instead of an answer, the thing simply left. The evil light left Keith's eyes. In its place was utter despair. Even if Keith wasn't responsible for the killings, his body had been used and he knew it. And felt responsible. He looked at her, pleading silently for help. The sight was almost enough to bring tears to her eyes. She didn't know how he was going to get through this, but she vowed to be by his side, no matter what happened. She stepped forward to take him in her arms, but stopped when a new look swept over his face. His eyes became huge with terror. He was looking behind her.

Carrie spun around, toward a roaring sound that began as soon as Keith started looking past her. The sound emanated from the poster, which had inexplicably changed. Instead of the swirl of colors, the surface had gone completely black. It appeared to be a doorway to dead space rather than a simple poster. Captivated by it, she approached, and noticed a red glow in the «distance» of the poster. Images of blazing furnaces sprung unbidden in her mind.

All at once, the poster was no longer empty. A horrible, charred man with a dirty red and green sweater looked from the frame. She recognized him as Freddy Krueger, the childkiller from long ago.

"How do you like *this* for 3-D?" Freddy roared. Before she could move, Freddy leapt through the poster and wrapped his arms around her. He had her, and proceeded to drag her toward the poster frame. Carrie's head soon penetrated the surface of the glass. There was only the weakest resistance as she passed through the "glass." Immediately she could feel the heat of a thousand fires. "You'll make a pretty picture," Freddy growled sensuously in her ear.

Twisting in his arms, Carrie managed to face Keith's room. Even though she wasn't fully through the picture, the room seemed a million miles away. Keith simply stood there, apparently catatonic.

"Keith! Help me! Please!" At first he didn't react. Freddy's laughter surged as he continued to draw her into his world. She was almost completely on the other side now. The air was stiflingly hot. In a desperate lunge, she grasped the edges of the poster frame in her hands. But Freddy was much stronger than she and would soon pry her hands loose. And she'd be lost. Taking a chance, Carrie allowed her legs to go past the frame. She savagely kicked at Freddy's chest, but seemingly to no avail. He merely continued to laugh, mockingly.

Then Keith appeared, grabbing at her. He had broken his trance.

"I've got you!" he yelled as he took her firmly by the arms and started to pull her out of the poster. Her kicks now seeming to have some effect, Freddy's grip loosened as Keith continued to pull. Carrie felt as if she'd be torn apart, but Keith appeared to be succeeding. Soon she was able to secure one foot on the edge of the frame. Pushing hard, she catapulted herself forward, knocking Keith to the ground.

Her feeling of safety lasted only a moment, as they both looked toward the poster. Freddy was beginning to emerge. But before he was fully through the frame, Keith was on his feet — hammer almost magically appearing in his hand. Using the claw end, he buried the hammer into Freddy's scarred head. Freddy screamed and recoiled. Wrenching the hammer away, Keith prepared for another blow. But this time, Freddy was prepared. With a swipe of his murderous talons, he slashed at Keith's arm, causing him to drop the hammer.

"I had planned on doing this ladies first," Freddy said as he hooked his other arm around Keith and drew him into the poster. "But I guess we'll go age before beauty!"

Carrie was at the poster with the hammer just as Keith was pulled through. His hands gripped weakly at the sides. He wouldn't last long, and Carrie knew she didn't have the strength to pull him back. Flailing with the hammer, she struck Freddy's arms, but he didn't notice.

"Smash the picture," Keith cried, "or whatever it is. You might be able to shatter it."

At first Carrie was confused. Then she understood: Breaking the picture might seal the entrance, or the hole, trapping Freddy on the other side. But that would mean trapping Keith as well. She started to protest when one of his hands slipped from the frame. He would be dragged in within seconds.

"Just do it!!" he yelled. His knuckles were white with strain.

Carrie realized she had no choice.

Drawing back the hammer with all her might, she brought it down on the glass. It shattered instantly, glass falling into the void just as Keith's hand finally slipped from the frame. With the breach came a rush of hot air, which blew her backward into the room. Sounds of laughing mingled with screaming as a glow formed in the center of the poster at the same time the frame seemed to buckle and shrink.

At the edges, the poster seemed to be collapsing in on itself, falling into Freddy's world. But the glow of the center came outward, forming a wormlike extension in the colors of the original poster. The worm shot out at her, stopping inches from her face. Its surface boiled and writhed. Finally a shape formed at the end of the worm: It was Freddy's face.

"Well, I guess you won't be joining my gallery, after all," he sneered. "But don't you worry, little girl, Freddy's never out of the picture for long!"

With that, the frame collapsed fully into itself, sealing the portal between the two worlds. This severed the worm's connection, causing it to dissolve in a shower of light.

All at once, the room appeared to return to normal. Carrie approached the wall slowly. Tentatively she touched the spot where the poster had been. The wall was solid. No trace remained of the poster, or what had been the hellish doorway. But the monster said he'd be back. Carrie believed him.

Springwood had not seen the last of Freddy Krueger.

Epilogue

Pooh Keith! He was so obsessed by how everyone else was better than him at something, he forgot to take a good look at himself. He lost sight. Well, I found him, and now he's here with me in the boiler room, among his friends.

Actually, his friends are among him. *Wherever he goes, he'll take a little piece of each of them. He's got Sandra's brain, Mario's strong body, Skrag's miraculous hands, and Pam's swift legs. And they're all wrapped in Keith's skin in one neat little package.*

Carrie was telling him the truth when she said he kept his friends together. It's just too bad there wasn't room for Mel. Oh well, some people just aren't cut out for the Internal Crowd, no matter how hard they try.

But Keith can finally be proud of himself now that, with a little help from his friends, he has become the ultimate model student!